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# On Surrey Hills



By A Son of the Marshes











ON SURREY HILLS

. . . "lay aside grave themes, and idly turn  
The leaves of memory's sketch-book, dreaming o'er  
Old summer pictures of the quiet hills,  
And human life, as quiet, at their feet."



# ON SURREY HILLS

BY

A SON OF THE MARSHES

AUTHOR OF 'WOODLAND, MOOR, AND STREAM,'  
'ANNALS OF A FISHING VILLAGE,' ETC.

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## P R E F A C E.

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THE volumes 'Woodland, Moor, and Stream' and the 'Annals of a Fishing Village,' edited by me from the Notes of "A Son of the Marshes," have met with so satisfactory a recognition of their merits, that both author and editor are encouraged to venture upon another series of sketches. The "Son of the Marshes" has now established for himself the reputation of a keen and enthusiastic student of bird, animal, and fish life in the woodlands, glades, and streams of our southern counties; and it has been the aim of the editor in revising his MSS. to preserve that deep sym-

pathy with and reverence for Nature which are the colouring characteristics of his writing.

Most of these chapters have appeared in 'Blackwood's Magazine,' and a few have not been in print before. I am indebted to the courtesy of the Editor of the 'Daily News' which allows me to include the description of a forest-fire that was witnessed by the author. Without this, it seemed to me these vivid descriptions of wild life on Surrey Hills would have been incomplete.

J. A. OWEN.



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# ON SURREY HILLS.

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## CHAPTER I.

### A ROADSIDE NATURALIST.

ENGLAND has been described by many a foreign visitor as the country *par excellence* of good roads and hedges, green turf and fruitful fields. Woods, moorlands, and heaths afford shelter to our wild creatures, and in some instances yield food also; but the great bulk of animal and bird life lives and multiplies by the roadsides, or close to them. Some of the walks to my work have taken me over roads with never a house for two long miles and more—roads protected on either side by high hedges that no rustic living could tell the age of, overgrown with grey moss and lichens, and having a broad stripe of



coarse turf on both sides, along which grew hawk-weed, vetches, thistles higher than myself, bryony, both white and black, and trailing brambles. Great clumps of rushes showed in all directions. Beyond the hedges fields extended, broken by copse-growth and woods. At certain seasons, when the weather has been rough, these long stretches of road—some portions of it under water—were almost as much as one could put up with.

I can assure those townsfolk who send forth a cry that wild nature and scenery are becoming difficult to find, that any amount of both still exists, within a short railway ride from London. I could show them localities where they might, without the least trouble on their part, get lost in a perfect network of byroads, unknown to the general public. Once these were the regular beaten tracks leading from one lonely hamlet to another. The turf covers portions of them now ; but they are still easily distinguishable, and travellers on foot make use of them at rare intervals. On either side of many of these, banks, topped with remains of ancient thorn and plum trees, mark their course ; and such byroads are favourite feeding-haunts and playing-grounds for the creatures.

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Our wild animals proper—such, at least, as show themselves under ordinary circumstances—are limited in number. It is of little use to look out for any particular creature, in order to note some peculiar action connected with its natural economy, if the bird or animal in question is at all uncommon. As a rule, you will have to be patient, and to trust to the course of events. You may have no opportunity of noting the desired habit for a year or even longer, but at some unsuspected moment that very action or movement will be exhibited, and your patience will be rewarded. It may be some way peculiar to itself of procuring its food, or the creature will perhaps come and play with its young at your feet. I have frequently lighted on wild things unexpectedly, and have made the most of the glimpse, for it is a sight of short duration. You may crouch, or lie down, or crawl on all-fours, moving as noiselessly as a snake—no matter how cautious you may be, something will tell that man is near, and the pleasing sight will be gone in a moment. For fourteen years I have been vainly trying to see one of our wild animals in the act of guarding its young in a time of danger. From early morning until late

in the evening, during times of leisure, I have tramped over lonely places day after day, ay, and week after week, in the right season, with only that one object in view, and I have never seen it yet. Some have been more fortunate, but it has been when they were neither expecting nor searching for it. It is the very uncertainty, I take it, that gives such a charm to the quest.

The general public know the fox as a very cunning animal that lives in the woods, and is hunted in the season. He certainly ranges the woods, but he will, if he is allowed to do so, make his home close to a roadside. A very practical roadside naturalist is Reynard, and he is intimately acquainted with the ways and means of living of all the creatures he preys on that frequent roads, whether they be green roads or rides, or the turnpike roads. On or from the highroads I have had my very best views of himself. Men go, many of them, far, in search of what they never find, whilst it is all the time lying close to their doors.

In Surrey, Sussex, and also in parts of Kent, the roads run through dry banks covered with the brush tangle peculiar to such localities. Here rabbits



burrow in the sand, or sandy loam, of which they are composed. Now, though hares, rabbits, pheasants, and partridges like cover to a certain extent, they do not like it when it is wet. So, directly the sun has dried up the roads, out they slip from the covers under the park-land palings, and on to the roads—the hares to dot up and down, flecking the sand off their hind-feet in order to dry them, and the pheasants and partridges to sun themselves, and to scuffle in the dry sand under the overhanging banks.

Reynard knows all about this, and he will hide himself in a patch of fern or broom, and there remain until a chance of capture offers. If Kitty Wren or a chaffinch or a tit does not see him he will be all right; but if one or the other marks him, the alarm-note is sounded, and this acts like magic, for from all quarters rush birds that have been before invisible—at least they have not been seen before on the banks. Jays, missel-thrushes, blackbirds, common thrushes, and the finches, all make common cause against the fox. Even the shrikes leave off beetle-hunting and 'chatter their loudest, with bowed heads and upflirted tails, making common cause with the finches. Directly the row is over they

would not have the least objection to kill and eat these if they could only get the chance. The upshot of it all is that it gets too warm for Reynard's comfort, and he makes tracks for a quieter neighbourhood. If he takes across the park-lands, all the rooks that are feeding there will follow and buffet him until he reaches cover. It is not always like this, however. He hides himself so cunningly, as a rule, that all prospers with his manœuvres. For one thing, he takes the greatest care to prevent the wind from blowing his peculiar odour in the direction of the creatures he is bent on capturing.

The hare may have dried his long hind-feet, so beautifully clothed with hair, to his complete satisfaction, and he thinks he will now devote a little time to his ears, face, and coat in general. For this purpose he brings his handy fore-feet into use, with which he also boxes to perfection, when he has any slight difference to settle with a rival. It is a most interesting and amusing sight to see a hare perform his toilet. First the long ears are adroitly manipulated, then the face, and those most important features of use and adornment, the whiskers, the sensitive tips of which tell him to a nicety whether

the hole in the hedge or the break in the park-palings is wide enough for his body to pass through, let the night be ever so dark and gloomy. There he sits, upright, without thought of danger, on his powerful hind-quarters, busily washing his face. He has almost finished his toilet, and is just giving the last gentle strokings to his whiskers, when, with a bound and a rush, something crosses over to him. There is a momentary scuffle, and a whirl of sand, then one long shriek of Aunt! Aunt! and all is over, far more quickly than one can write about it. Reynard carries his quarry up the opposite bank, and into cover, with as much ease and in the same fashion that the retriever chained to his kennel at the keeper's cottage close at hand would carry a rabbit. I have often seen his earth with the tokens of what he has taken scattered about, but I have not often seen him there. When the cubs begin to eat flesh, one may have a chance of seeing them really at home.

So far as the sagacity of the fox is concerned, it has been overrated. There exist in the popular mind two very distinct ideas of the fox, the one of verse and tradition—Master Reynard and Reineke



Fuchs—which as naturalists we may as well have done with for good and all; the other the actual fox, fortunately the only representative of the wild dog existent in England. That he is clever we must own; impudent and daring we know him to be; but these latter qualities have been developed by the protection that has been given him for generations. I make this statement fearlessly, having verified it by long observation. I lay no claim to be a scientist, being simply a workman, one of the rank and file; none, however, has better opportunities for getting at the real facts than a working man who happens to have natural history on the brain. The fox is frequently outwitted to his cost, a proof that he is not so clever as he is popularly supposed to be.

I will give one illustration of his manœuvring well known to myself in a locality where hares were numerous. No hare, not even when life is at stake, will go through an opening which has been defiled by the passage of a fox. When the latter has designs on the hare, he will pass through the creature's mews. One hare-preserve familiar to me was bounded towards the road by a high steep bank, topped by a four-feet fence. There were several

exits for the hares in the line of fencing, but Reynard had cunningly befouled the lot. Then he set to work, singled out a hare, and chased him like a greyhound. Mad with fear, the hare took the fence, clearing it like any steeplechaser, and came down smash into the road below, being completely stunned for the time by his impetuous leap. Through the hare's mews at the foot of the fence slipped the fox, showing his tusks in pleasant anticipation of a nice meal easily procured. His schemes, however, on that particular morning were curiously frustrated; for as puss in her leap hurtled past the head of a certain workman early on his way, getting stunned in her fall on the road, she was picked up, with the remark that if he allowed her to lie there some cart might run over her. The look on that fox's face as he stood in view on the bank-top, before he sneaked off, was a sight to see.

When Reynard dashes into a covey of partridges dusting themselves by the roadside, he uses his forepaws with cat-like dexterity, cuffing the birds down. I have known him bury what he could not eat at the time of capture close to the well-frequented carriage-drive of a gentleman's house, and have watched him

as he went there for it and played with it like a kitten, tossing it up and cuffing it from side to side before eating it. The vixen littered and brought up her cubs on that same carriage-drive close to the mansion. The fact of her being there was known only to two people, and they kept the knowledge to themselves.

My own personal acquaintance with the fox has always been in connection with farms, and the high-roads running close to them. That a fox and vixen could make their earth close to a farmyard gate, bring up their cubs and play with them there, so that any passers-by on the road could see them, sounds improbable. But I can myself vouch for this fact. He is a protected animal, to what extent those only know who are affected to their loss by his living near them.

A keeper who had been discharged for some imputed blame, where a fox was concerned, once said to me: "If you lets 'em get into mischief you hears somethin' middlin' stiff; an' if they cums more 'an once to the covers and don't find a fox, you soon gits the billet. I've known 'em turned out of a bag afore now: they'd got 'em from Leadenhall Market,



a' purpose just to save a rumpus, when the farmers had killed 'em off to save their own stuff. The dogs would chop into them and kill 'em quick afore they'd got precious little way. Ye see they be strange, and don't know where to run to. But it's all right if they finds and kills a fox."

Foxes are the cause of more trouble and ill-feeling amongst keepers than all the rest of the vermin put together. Almost any offence is overlooked more readily than the killing of a fox.

Polecats, stoats, and weasels all live and hunt in old hedges bordered by waste grounds, close to the highroads. I have known all three species to be procured from one old hedgerow. In some localities where I have lived, the powerful and ferocious polecat was so common that his name was constantly used to express all that was bad. The nearer he could establish himself to a house the better it suited him; and he had the very worst reputation on account of the harm he did to poultry.

Rabbits, rats, mice, frogs, and birds all live and roost or rest in hedges. The bottom of any good old hedge parting two fields is a perfect fortress for the creatures. Strange to say, the hunt will be

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started in the hedge, but the kill will almost invariably take place in the middle of the road. "A fair field and no favour" is their motto. The mouse, rat, or rabbit, as soon as it is startled, quits the hedge-bottom, and makes tracks for the open. If the quarry be a rat or a mouse, it is dragged back to the cover of the hedge again, as is the case, too, if it be a young rabbit; but a full-grown rabbit will be left lying in the road where his enemy has killed him and sucked his blood, for the first passer-by to pick up and take home. These animals killed by the stoats or the polecats are fully appreciated by the country folks who find them. For perfect impudence what creature can surpass the little weasel, as he stands in the middle of the road and takes stock of you with a mouse in his mouth? As to the stoat, he will, if the farmer permit, make his home in an old fagot-stack, and there bring up his family of stoat kittens, most carefully provided for by mother stoat and himself with stolen delicacies—the lot frisking about in a most barefaced manner, like a pack of harlequins. The numbers of rats, mice, and frogs disposed of in the course of a single year must be great indeed. But when the kittens begin to eat

flesh freely, young chicks and ducklings are a temptation not to be resisted. They will fetch, carry, and hoard until not one will be left to the farmer's wife unless the thieves are killed off.

Rats and mice claim the hedgerows and the roads; they have their summer and their winter quarters. In tramping along the highways, I have watched and noted all the members of the family, from the common brown rat down to the black water-vole and the two species of water-shrews. Squirrels also and dormice on and about our country roads are plentiful enough. Even the timid mole is a common object there at times. He will leave his hillock-heaving, and come running about in front of one in broad daylight. Folks call him the blind mole; but let your fingers get near his snout, and then tell us what you think of his blindness. A most ferocious little fellow he is, and he fights with all the determination of a bull-terrier. I have undergone a considerable amount of biting in my roadside pursuit of natural history. The bite of a wild rabbit is like being cut with a chisel; the bite of a squirrel, too, requires a good deal of fortitude in bearing it patiently. No one I have ever known bitten by a squirrel but



gave that small animal a pretty wide berth for the future.

If man will only allow the wild creatures to draw near to him, and to the roads that lead to his places, they will all do so, no matter what their nature may be. Just out of gunshot of almost any country house or cot, whether it stand in cultivated land or midst rough, rushy, woodland meadow, you may study the animal life that enlivens and adorns the landscape. From a little gravelly pool beside a well-frequented road I have started that most shy wader, the green sandpiper, and that in the very heart of our Surrey woodlands. I fancied that it might have nested somewhere near—for this beautiful bird, though a wader, lays its eggs in the deserted nests built by other birds high up in the trees.

The hedgehog runs the roads freely. He is a quaint little fellow, our hedge-pig, having far more intelligence than people give him credit for. It is curious, as you stand perfectly still in the middle of a road, to see him come running along, then stopping to sniff and whine and examine the high strange object that hardly breathes lest he startle the little creature. Then with a gentle grunt he will pass you

by. A very low yet quite decided grunt he gives, and he whines as well. Shakespeare, who seems to have been a most excellent out-of-doors naturalist—a minute observer of life, indeed, in all shapes—noticed the hedgehog, and wrote, “The hedgehog whines at night.” If any one of our readers possesses a tame hedgehog, let him examine the eye of the creature if he has not already done so. If the eye is the index to the mind, as I firmly believe it to be, the hedgehog knows a great deal, and only uses his knowledge for his own special benefit.

Leaving the animal department of our roadside observations, we will pass on to the birds, considering first the day-flying raptures, or birds of prey. All those that are left to us keep in close touch with man—so much so, that they have suffered a woful thinning down at his hands. Yet they still visit his stack and poultry yards in search of quarry of one sort or another, taking it into the middle of one of his fields or on to the middle of the highroad, to make a meal off it. The hen-harriers and the sparrow-hawks hunt and kill the partridges by the roads after the corn is cut, and the birds are frequently cut down as they clear the hedge to cross over the

road. More than once have I noted the captor crouching over his quarry in the middle of the road. As to owls—the grand feathered cats, and our farmers' best friends—you may always find them about the roadside, in summer or winter, if you know their haunts. They generally hunt in couples, if their young are out of the way for the season. There was one country road down which I used to travel regularly at one time in the evening, that had two gates exactly opposite each other at one point of it, leading from one lot of fields to another lot belonging to the same farm. Oat and wheat stacks stood on either side of both gates, just clear of them, only allowing enough room for the waggons to pass in and out. On each gate a white owl would perch regularly evening after evening. I saw them there, watching for the rats and mice that ran across the road from one lot of stacks to the other. What these two missed would hardly have furnished a meal for a shrike. Any owl on the hunt is as lively as a falcon, and quite as eager, although in a different fashion. I have frequently heard a pair of them just over my head as I walked along. On looking up I could see them just above me, hissing and snoring in the most



amiable manner possible. By the way, there is one way of looking at a creature without alarming it, and that is to look as you continue to pass along: a dead stop will cause it to move on at once. The brown owl, although it is more essentially a bird of the woods than the white owl, swoops round and about the roads.

The numbers of creatures that cross roads at night can hardly be imagined. Frogs and toads quit their hiding-places in the moist stripes near the hedges, and hop about in all directions. To the brown owl a nice jumping frog is a great delicacy; he drops down on him whenever he catches sight of him. The difference between a toad and a frog our brown owl knows far better than you do. The worst of it is, he will pull poor froggy to pieces all alive, and he is not at all particular on which part he begins first. I have heard the frogs complaining most bitterly about the cruelty of the operation. It may not be a universally known fact that the frog has a voice independently of his croaking, but it is a fact. A most eloquent one it is, too, when he is completely upset, and it can be heard for some distance. If you wish to practise a harmless joke at his expense, some

evening when you see him sitting in the grass, contemplating nothing in particular, step back and break off a pliant twig; then rustle it gently in the grass behind him, in imitation of a snake crawling. He will spring away, bleating in terror. When the brown owl grips him, the frog is both hurt and frightened; happily the suffering is of short duration—owls make quick work of their victims. Beetles these birds pick up, as well as larger game, and the roads are just the parts beetles disport themselves in, both by day and night.

The fern owl, or goatsucker, loves the roads, for all kind of insects hover and settle about them: after the sun has been on the bare ground all the day, it becomes warm towards night. Let any one watch on a midsummer's evening a row of fine elms lining one of our country roads, if he would know how insect-life is kept in check. Bats and goatsuckers go to work with a will, even before the swallows, swifts, and martins have quite ended their labours of the day; and from the great bat down to the little flutter-mouse, they continue for hours, wheeling, twisting, and darting about in pursuit of their insect prey. They have only one object in

view—that of procuring the insects of various species that swarm in hosts over and about the fine old elms.

Flycatchers are on the watch all the day long for their food, which they mostly capture in flight. They will sit on rails and posts by the side of the road, very contentedly apparently ; but they are watching and waiting for their prey, and when it comes near will seize it with a snap that can be distinctly heard. The red-backed shrike is the vigilant watchman of the roads for insect-life, both flying and crawling. He is sure to be near at hand, just off the road ; his hawk-like form and his well-known “chack !” are familiar to all those who regularly travel along the highways. If you wish to see him in full force—that is, two or three pairs of shrikes at work at the same time—go to the foot of some railway embankment which is close to the road. There you will see them sitting in pairs, at stated intervals, watching for prey. Trains do not frighten them ; they seem to understand that the rumble and shake of the ground gives them food. The vibration caused by the passing train causes the insects to dart from their shelters, and then the shrikes are busy.

So well known has it become to all insect-feeding



birds that railway tracks are good hunting-grounds, that it is now a common sight to see rooks perched on the telegraph-posts, waiting for a train to pass. The moment it has gone by they dash off to feed. Even that most wary bird, the green woodpecker, will hunt along the line at certain seasons. Woods and very wild moorlands and the heaths are, comparatively speaking, lifeless: you must go to the borders of the highways to see both animal and bird life in full activity. They will go to covert, if driven, for safety; but all, from the boldest to the shyest, prefer to live a short distance—often a very short distance indeed—from man and the roads he travels on, if he will allow them to do so.

Crows, magpies, and jays *flit* over the roads, from copse to copse and from field to field; but on the road itself they do not care to settle, for this reason: they know that they are in bad odour with the general community of men, on account of the trick they have of pilfering all that comes within the range of their vision, whether it be young poultry or fruit, eggs or young game, both furred and feathered. Two or three magpies or a family of jays will do a considerable amount of mischief in a very brief space.

So they are continually reminded in no gentle terms to "move on," which accounts for their restless feelings and habits. Where not interfered with, I have known them to be almost as tame and as confident as thrushes.

Wild geese—bean-geese, not bernicles or grey lag-geese—will pitch in the farmer's fields to feed on the clover that is sure to shoot up, young and tender, when the stubbles are left fallow for a time. Grass meadows also have great attraction for them. I have seen them flying over the lowlands at the base of the Surrey hills, where the farms are far apart from one another, to favourite grazing-grounds, in the season when they travel. A farmer's son I knew—a keen shot and good roadside observer—rose a gaggle from his father's farmyard pond early one morning. That coot-footed little swimmer, the phalarope, has pitched in a farmer's pond more than once, where he swam about, light as a cork, amongst the ducks. As to the snipe, he will come in sharp weather to the drain near the farmer's back-door, and remain there feeding, if he be not disturbed or shot. Ignorant agitators have raved about our waste lands; what do they know about the matter?

Those broad stripes, keeping moist even in midsummer, that line either side of so many country roads, are the good angels of the fields. Deep water-courses run down all of these moist borders, hidden by the tangle. The fields must be drained, more or less; and these are the natural outlets for the water that would, if it remained, ruin the land for corn-growing purposes.

Besides this, the tangled stripes and the old hedges benefit our domestic creatures as well as all wild things. The horses, donkeys, cows, ducks, and geese of the poorer proprietors all find food on these roadside stripes. And what would the cottagers, who keep bees in considerable quantities now, on the modern system of bee-keeping, do, if the wastes, with all their wealth of wild-flowers, were "improved" away? The distances that bees fly to gather honey would hardly be credited except by those who keep them, and are familiar with their ways.

If I wished to see that feathered model of suspicion the hawfinch, I should expect to find him, if anywhere about, on a hedge-top, cracking sloe, bullace, or wild-plum stones.



When spring is here, that harbinger of the cuckoo, the wryneck, will come and shout out his peet-peet-peet-peet-pee-pee-pee on the old pollard, or on the moss-covered trunk of some fruit-tree, for my notice, as I wander along. So close have I been to him that I could study all his delicate moth-like markings and his movements to perfection. Like the robin and the wren, as well as the cuckoo, with whose coming they so closely associate him, the wryneck is one of the country children's favourite birds.

Mary Howitt, a true lover of nature and all her children, from the greatest to the least, describes the harbinger of the cuckoo so sweetly, that we may be pardoned for reminding our readers of her lines :—

“ Pee ! pee ! pee ! says the merry pee-bird,  
And as soon as the children hear it,  
‘ The cuckoo’s coming,’ they say, ‘ for I heard  
Up in the tree the merry pee-bird,  
And he’ll come in three days, or near it.’  
The days go on, one, two, three,  
And the little bird singeth ‘ pee ! pee ! pee !’  
Then on the morrow, ’tis very true,  
They hear the note of the old cuckoo ;  
Up in the elm-tree through the day,  
Just as last summer he shouted away ;  
‘ Cuckoo !’ the cuckoo doth cry,  
And the little boys mock him as they go by.”

I claim Mary Howitt as one of our company of roadside naturalists.

Donkeys are credited with feeding largely on thistles, those prickly roadside products. He may munch the tender tops of the plants now and then, but you do not catch the *asinus* harmonious, grass-organ, thistle-puke, or beesweet—all these names are given to that animal in our rural district—eating thistles when he can get better food. The donkey is very fastidious in many of his habits; in drinking he is particularly so. Shakespeare noted this, and one of his characters says—

“Would that the fountain of thy mind was clear,  
That I might water an ass at it.”

No, not for donkeys do those thistles grow so rank and so luxuriously, but for the birds that flock to them for food when their seeds are ripe. It is one of the prettiest of my roadside sights, that of a flock of twenty or thirty goldfinches fluttering over the stems and heads of the thistles, and clinging to them in all manner of positions. Twenty or thirty I call a large flock—goldfinches are getting scarcer with us. Titmice—all the tits—feed more or less on thistle-seeds;

in hard weather I have seen siskins and redpolls busily at work on thistles, for they were the only plants that rose above the surface of the snow.

Blackbirds, thrushes, hedge-sparrows, willow-wrens, white-throats, and nightingales all nest and get their living by the roadsides. I have often listened to the nightingale singing not ten feet above my head, and have found his nest in the bank—and left it there—only a yard or two from the main road.

Before we leave hedgerow life, mention should be made of the entomologists who find in and about the hedges happy hunting-grounds, both by day and night. Butterflies, moths, and beetles abound, and even the last-named creatures have their ardent and devoted followers. The hawk-moths—or sphinx family—delight in such localities: before some of our ancient hedges were grubbed up, in my younger days, I have made some good captures of various members of that family. The death's-head moth and the caterpillar of the moth used to be frequently found in the potato-fields at that time, to the disgust of the rustics who worked in the fields. They attributed to the caterpillar certain harmful and supernatural qualities that showed a wonderful imagination on



their part. I have known a well-to-do farmer's wife and daughter put aside a heavy three-weeks' wash for that day, because a splendid specimen of the death's-head moth had been found on one of the tubs that they intended to use. In spite of the progress made in education, many curious superstitions linger, and will linger still for many years to come, in our more isolated country districts. With the superstitions the old folk-lore, valuable in its way, will go too. Many of our cottagers will still forbid the bringing of wild birds' eggs into the house. Woe betide the children, though, if they do not at once bring in those of the hen or duck that may be laying away!

By roadside waters I have in my wanderings lingered, rod in hand : nearly all the mill pools or ponds are naturally close to the highways. The streams that feed them run in a line with the roads as a rule, or they cross them. But all mill-ponds and mill-streams have peculiar rights attached to them—rights which are most jealously guarded by the owners. Our rustic miller puts his foot down and states in the most emphatic manner "that he wunt hev the feathered critturs shot at, nor the fish dragged out on it." Though the wayfarer may study bird-life,

“as he runs,” most freely, he will find fish-studies a very different matter. When I have tried to make some close observations of the sort myself, it has not always turned out either to my own satisfaction or to that of the miller, and it has led me into some awkward positions.

If a pond is required for cattle-drinking purposes at a farmhouse, they generally lead the runnels from the meadows to the spot where they wish to make one. In these ponds there are usually fish, and good ones too; for where the cattle drink and the ducks dabble about, there is a continual supply of good food, insect-life following the cattle even to the water's edge.

Any angler, of course, will tell in less than ten minutes if a pool or stream has got fish in it. Certain fish have certain actions in the water: slight though these may be, they are sufficient to let the initiated observer know what are there. There is, however, in some cases a crabbed cantankerous host to deal with, who, even after you have propitiated him with good pay for the right to fish in his water, will harry you with advice and restrictions.

“You ain’t to use no live bait—master don’t ’low it; ’sidders as it’s torturin’ little fishes.” In vain to tell the man the baits you intend to spin with are dead ones. “No,” says he, “master wunt hev it.” On one of these occasions, after considerable grumbling, I threw my box of dead baits, packed in bran, over as far as I could throw, to my companion, who was in the alder swamps close at hand, and then produced a large bag of fine dew-worms. “Ah, you ken catch all ye ken with them ’ere worms,” the man said on leaving me.

I caught some good roach and perch with worms, and then sat down to my lunch. Just as I was beginning to eat, the same man who had given me that unwelcome piece of information strolled down to see if I was having any luck. With a rueful grimace I pointed to one or two roach and perch. Then I earnestly pressed him to accept a good wedge of veal and ham pie, and to imbibe a reputed quart of Bass’s best bitter. This he did to his own perfect satisfaction and to mine also, for under its mellowing influence he informed me that his master had gone out and would not be back



before night, adding, in a kindly and reflective mood, "It's a'most a pity as you chucked all them 'ere dead baits away, fur master is gone, an' what his eyes never seed his heart could never grieve arter. I'll cum an' see yer agin afore long."

I gave the man an inward benediction as he departed, such as the gipsies' magpie bestowed on the parish constable; then from my tackle-case I took out two artificial spinning-baits, made on the most approved principles, put them on, traces and all complete, and set to work. They took to perfection—with the pike and perch. I am not able to say whether it was the pie and the ale that inclined the mind of the miller's man to contemplation—but one thing I know, from one of the upper windows of the mill he calmly watched my fishing luck. It was a short meadow's length from the mill; but as he saw the flash of scales when the fish were grassed, even his stolid nature was stirred to excitement, and crying that he "must raly go an' see thet good luck," he came down and out towards me. Very quickly the traces were slipped off, and worm-tackle was substituted. Fortunately, just

as he reached me, a small jack took one of the worm baits, as they will frequently do.

After a little more refreshment I allowed him to inspect my catch: then he begged me as a favour to leave the remaining worms with him, for "never in his martil life had he ever knowed worms to ketch jacks an' perches like that; he should try them 'ere worms himself when the old man was out of the way." Many of my readers who have fished—I use the word with emphasis—know that at times it is absolutely necessary to propitiate the guardian genii of the place with fluids more potent and soothing than the water that surrounds them on all sides. There is the old saw of all being fair in love and war, about the truth of which I am unable to offer an opinion; but I firmly believe that all is fair in fishing when you pay for it. The fluctuations inseparable from my particular branch of work have always given me more leisure than was at times acceptable or profitable; for days and weeks at certain seasons I am free to wander abroad at will, but I trust in these rambling notes I have said enough to convince my readers that even a

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workman who might have no other opportunities of following up his studies in natural history—if that be his bent—than along the highroads over which he must travel morning and evening to and from his work, will find ample opportunities for observation in going and coming.



## CHAPTER II.

## AMONG THE HILLS.

SURREY HILLS, or, as they have been justly named, the Surrey Highlands, have a charm peculiarly their own. To the lover of nature, under their varied aspects, influenced by overhanging storm or clouds, or by the bright glad sunshine, they are beautiful, with their rich depth of colour: to the true field naturalist they offer all that he could wish for in the way of natural life—fur, fish, and feather, to say nothing of the insect and floral wealth, which I believe to be unsurpassed in the length and breadth of England. In the pursuit of my business I have *entirely* wandered much over these hills, along their sides and through the great stretches of valley-lands that go by the name of Weald. This term, however,

gives but a slight idea of the actual country. For nearly forty years, since I left the home of my youth in the North Kent marshes, I have spent the greater portion of my daily life in the open air among these fertile valleys and hills, so that I may fairly claim a close acquaintance with the scenery of Surrey, the wild creatures that inhabit it, and last, but not least, the robust and kind-hearted people, the woodmen of the forest-lands.

I made my home for a time in a rambling old-fashioned building, which was covered with moss and lichens from the doorstep right up to the chimneys. Old it was in every sense of the word, both inside and out. It stood alone in a sheltered nook of the moor ; and, with the exception of a ride of the softest and greenest turf running the whole length of the valley, it was completely shut in on both sides by the firs. Beyond these lay the wild moorland ; and on all sides of that the woods, the remains of a grand forest which covered Surrey and Sussex in years gone by.

Some of these places were not, until a few years back, visited by a strange face from one year to another ; now—and more's the pity, some of us think

—they are overrun in the summer months by men and women who enjoy themselves in various fashions, some of these by no means rural. The majority of these pleasure-seekers are like those who gaze at the exterior of a beautiful casket, in total ignorance of the jewels within. There yet remain innumerable spots on and about the footlands of the glorious hills, where nature can be studied in all her primitive wildness; where a man may forget himself and his petty troubles, whilst the wild things will come almost to his feet and look at him in wonder; where the turf has the richness and softness of velvet, and so very still is it that the gentle coo of the wood-pigeon falls with startling effect on the ear.

Those beautiful insects the fritillaries flit over you there with dashing flight in all directions: so strong is the beat of wing in the larger species that a faint click can be distinctly heard at each stroke.

Here one may rest from morning till night and feel afterwards that not only is weary brain and overcharged heart lulled and soothed, but one is better and wiser for so resting. More salutary than any medicine is the scent from the firs and the warm earth. If you are restless and ill at ease, a gentle

drowsiness steals over you, as you listen to the soft hum of the summer breeze through the needles of the firs, or the faint dripping tinkle of the trout stream that runs through the glades. Drop down into the valleys from the higher lands where you will, and you will come on those small rills with their tiny trout,—pigmy fish, that fully illustrate the fitness of all the conditions of natural law : a tiny rill with tiny fish in it ; larger mouths would not get enough here to fill them. These small fish are not young ; they are the dwarf trout of the moorland rills.

I am out on the moor early on a soft May morning. It is just light enough to see things : the old clock indoors struck four as I slipped outside, the best time for observation. Not a sound is to be heard, and bird-life seems at first to be extinct. Not so, however, for through the thin mist two birds pass over with a swish of the wings. They are the mallard and his mate, the duck leading. The wild duck frequents spots which the duck tribe generally are not supposed to visit. After the corn is cut they will come to the harvest fields for the scattered grain ; also to the margin of the woods for acorns, if there is any water near. To prove this shoot your



duck, and then examine the contents of the bird's stomach.

The sun is up now, and the light mist floats over the tops of the firs. Our path runs through them for a couple of miles or more. The trunks shine like copper bronze in spots where the light breaks through, and the fresh green tips of new foliage stand out like emerald tassels against the old, which will gradually drop off in small dead needles, making a carpet beneath, soft to walk on; or a couch whereon to lie for a time, to rest and inhale their health-giving fragrance.

With a clap-clap-clap of his strong wings, the wood-pigeon shoots up over the tree-tops, and floats, with outspread tail and wings, for his mate to look up at and admire, as she sits on her slight platform of twigs not ten feet overhead. This action of his is peculiar, and only to be seen when the birds are nesting. On a branch, full in the morning light, sits another fine fellow. What a picture he makes! The purple tint of his breast, the patch of white on his neck and warm grey of his back, touched here and there with black on the wings, make a study to be noted. With a rush and scolding chatter the

squirrels play overhead, leaping and swinging from branch to branch. Look at that harmony of colour displayed where one sits with a fir cone in his hands. His bushy tail is set up with just a small light tip to it; like his back and sides and limbs, it has a warm reddish-cinnamon tint: and with his bright black eyes and creamy white chest, you have a terra-cotta study brought out and harmonised to perfection by the olive-green of the fir foliage. In spring-time the squirrel's fur is different from what it is in winter.

As I near the sloping part of the wood a sound comes up from the opposite side of the glade, causing me to stand quite quiet. It is the call of the black-cock at play. Creeping to the edge of the wood from tree to tree, I look out, and there is a sight which you might hunt long for and not see. Right in front, and below the spot where I am concealed, on a platform consisting of felled fir-trunks not yet carted off, struts a Black Prince in the bright sunlight, on a portion of the trunks where the bark has been stripped off. He is showing himself in full dress suit to the ladies of his feather, who stand looking at him from the green turf of the moor. His head bent low, feathers puffed out, tail bent over his

head, and wings trailed, he croons away to his heart's content. Now and then, when he gives himself extra grand airs by jumping up and coming down in a different position, he looks very like being half choked with pleasure and self-satisfaction. We have a combination of blue, purple, white, and the crimson wattles over the eyes, brought up by the red-grey of bark and the buff-white of the bare trunk. A blue sky overhead and the velvet turf, littered over here and there with blocks of moss-covered stone, complete the picture.

I could have looked at the birds for hours if it had been possible, but my picture was spoilt by a mischievous meddling magpie which had been following me in true magpie fashion at a distance, from tree to tree, having evidently made up his mind that my movements were suspicious. With a clacking alarm-note he flew over the trees to the other side of the glade; and before he had gone half-way, the Black Prince and his admirers had vanished like a dream.

No matter how the habits and form of the various species may differ, all birds seem to understand a warning cry. As I pass over the green stripe, I start

them again from some young firs self-sown. These young trees spring up in all directions, single, and in clumps which give fine cover. The birds like these places, because they get here a good look-out as a rule. Blackcock are very shy. With a note of warning to the hens, up he springs again, the white on his wings and tail-coverts showing distinctly, while his back flashes steel-blue in the sun. The hens follow, three of them, and they are soon over the trees to find a fresh playground. They are late this season, for it has been a bitter winter and a long one, the snow covering the hills far into April.

“How do such large birds live on the moors and hills in such bitter weather?” I was asked once by a naturalist, so called because he had studied bird-life from books and stuffed specimens. Stuffed, indeed!—the word is suitable: tow rammed down their throats, and little more.

The stems of the dead plants, especially those of the fern, are tough: any one who has walked through the brake must have noticed how they cross and fall over, making a tangle. When the snow falls it is caught and held up by the dead fronds and stems. More falls, and only the tips here and there peep



through. The mass gets frozen, and forms a roof which leaves an open space underneath. It may freeze, and the north-east winds may sweep over, day and night, but it is warm below the surface. And there vegetation thrives: the grass, heath, and whortleberry shrubs are in a grand conservatory designed by the same Great Power that created all things. The blackcock and other birds live beneath the snow; so do the hares, rabbits, and other creatures. I have pulled the top roofing of snow off, like a tablecloth, from some places, in one large frozen flake, after six weeks of bitter weather, and have found the vegetation below green, tender, and growing in good condition.

And that is how the large birds live. When Black Prince wants to come out and look round him, he knocks a hole through quickly. The covering is only a slight one in some parts, and he knows all about it. It is somewhat startling to see a large bird like that come from nowhere, as folks say, and disappear again in the same mysterious direction.

Pay a visit to a furze brake, when the snow covers all the top—a furze brake where the stems in many places are as thick as a man's leg and as high as

your head, I mean. They can be found like that in places now few and far between, I am sorry to say, for the forest-fires have made havoc with those sanctuaries for bird and beast and insect. To explore a little, put on a pair of leather gloves and gaiters, and crawl in. You will find it warm. The furze needles that have been dropping for who knows how many years form a soft carpet. Dig down with your fingers, and you are surprised at the depth of decayed needles, also at the animal life. Insects of innumerable kinds hide and live in the fallen matter. When the weather would kill them outside, they find comfort and plenty there. Great humble-bees lie-up in the dry needles for the winter, and other things not quite so harmless.

You will find all the insect-eating birds that remain with us through the winter, if it is a severe one, in and about one of those old-time furze brakes, with very few exceptions.

Right in front of me, as I ramble on, are the beech-woods. Other trees grow there; a fringe of hazel-bushes runs in broken clumps just on the top of a splashed bank. That is the term for a rough wall composed of turf and stones, thrown up, years

ago, to keep cattle from roaming about the woods. After a time seedling trees shoot and grow; and when these are large enough the woodman gives them a cut in a slanting direction, and pegs them down along the side of the bank. From them fresh shoots come, so that after a time the bank is bound in all directions. Fresh turf is placed over the cut branches, and the whole grows; there are hazel-bushes on the top. No cattle can storm a moorland splashed bank.

There is a stile for chance wanderers this way, and on it I rest for a time. The sun is well up in the sky, and something within tells me breakfast would be acceptable; but I have four more miles to walk before I can get it. My resting-place is warm and pleasant. Other creatures find it so too, and they come out to enjoy it. A rustle amongst the dead leaves makes me look down. On the mossy root of one of the hazels sits a dormouse—a beauty—with a nut that he has brought from his storehouse near. Not far above is his nest, where he has slept through all the hard winter. He is a bright, handsome little fellow, active as a squirrel in his own domain amid the nut-bushes.

All banks and dry-stone walls are favourite spots for observing the mouse tribe. They thrive there and play about in all directions. As I sit quiet on the stile, a couple of woodmice run out, and very soon they begin to feed on some tender grass shoots. They resemble the dormouse in their colour, which is a bright fawn, but their tails are not bushy. Quite as large they are also ; and they, too, sit up to eat. As I move to enter the wood they scamper away quickly.

Great trees stand all about me, some of them covered half-way up with moss and lichens, and their lower branches touch the ground, which is covered with decayed leaves, giving a warm brown-red tone, which brings out in strong relief the moss-covered, grey-toned trunks. In many places that rich leaf-mould is two feet deep and more. The light falls on the tender bright-green leaves and plays on the tree-trunks here and there, while Cuckoo! cuckoo! is heard on all sides. In some places you catch a sight of wild cherry and crabtree in full blossom, mingled with the mountain-ash. Close to you, singing with all his heart to cheer his mate on her nest, is the flute-player of the woods,



the blackbird. Morning and evening, with other birds near of kin, he sings his hymn to the rising and setting sun.

Deep within the wood, and close to the narrow track, stand a few decayed firs which have thrown out a fibrous growth in patches. A small portion of a bird's wing with blood on it below one of these, at my feet, makes me look quickly upward. I can see a sparrow-hawk's nest with young ones in it. They are hungry, and are calling for "mother." Spar'-hawk, the woodmen call him very fitly, for he or "she," as they say, will fly at anything. Here she comes with a bird of some kind. She sees me, and the bird is dropped quickly in the nest. A flash of wings and tail, and "mother" is off,—not far away though, for she is on the watch.

In a captive state the sparrow-hawk is not the most gentle of pets. I have reared them from the nest, male and female. It is surprising what they will eat: they have tempers of their own, too, in common with their keepers. One day spar'-hawk will perch on your hand—well gloved mind—a bold, handsome, good-humoured bird: the next time you offer your hand he will strike, bite, and shriek, and

throw himself on his back like a feathered maniac. No; as a pet he is a failure, and is better at large, —a bird without fear, and with a large appetite.

Hark! that is the yaffle's laugh. The green woodpecker is called a yaffle by the woodlanders here. Another answers him; if we are cautious we may get a sight of them. There he is; louder and nearer comes his tap-tap-tap. Drawing close to a large tree-trunk, I peer out. The woods begin to ring with their cries. They are on that old decayed beech which is almost ready to fall with age, the yaffle and his mate. What a picture of bird-life! with his crimson and yellow-green back against the old grey trunk. They are at play again, and they cry as they chase each other over, under, and round about the trunk and limbs, while with their claws they make as much rattle as a couple of cats on the climb would. The pretty sight is soon put an end to. "Ike, ike!" a cry of alarm to her mate, and the female bird dives into a hole in the tree. The male scuttles round with a yell, for a grey bird shoots with a flash from some tree near, where he has been on the watch. It is a male sparrow-hawk. The yaffle knows his life is in

danger; trust to his wings he dares not: if he is to escape, it must be by his feet. With head turning in all directions, and body close to the tree-trunk, he looks for his enemy. Here he comes! a close shave it is this time. Quick as thought the hawk recovers himself for the mount. The yaffle's head is only just missed; another pounce, and one or two of his back-feathers fly: the hawk has changed his method of attack, and struck at him sideways. The yaffle, mad with fear, is clattering and shrieking, while his mate answers him. He is near her hiding-place; if he can only get there he will be safe, but he is nearly beat. With a rush the hawk comes for him and misses. Before he can turn again, quick though he is, the yaffle dives into the place of refuge with his mate. You see the green woodpeckers frequently on the ant-hills in the meadows adjoining the woods, and I think they will hold their own for a long time if the woods remain. They are very shy, and are rarely shot. All their mode of life tends to concealment. It is only when the male bird thinks of taking to himself a mate that he shows himself to advantage. Then he and she certainly talk loudly enough together; and

his laugh does not do him good, for it sometimes costs him his life. He is a splendid fellow—if he is not stuffed.

Clearing the woods, a strip of moorland has to be crossed; and about the edge of the belt of woodland, woodcocks sometimes nest. Well do I remember one nest where Mrs Woodcock hatched out all right; and she used to lead her little chicks from the wood on to the moor to feed. I told a person once that a woodcock and her young had been running about close to me. He smiled, a wise benevolent smile, and said nothing. It was quite enough,—I dislike benevolent smiles much. To settle his unbelief, I could have placed the mother and family in his hands if I had thought fit, but not for twenty pounds would I have done it.

The moor dips down from here to the main road—the road, in fact, cuts it in two parts—and then the woods begin again. There are hills, valleys, moors, and scrub growth. The hills are full of water, and the moors act like a sponge to run it off. Some of the moorland has been cleared from heather, and turned into rough field land, bearing a crop of coarse grass and rushes. In one of these



fields through which I frequently passed snipe had nested—the only pair about that quarter. Many a time the woodmen and their boys stopped to watch the snipe's play, and to listen to the peculiar sound made in its downward flight. That bird was never shot or molested in any way, and yet it was not preserved ground he nested on. "We likes to see him cut them capers, we do—it's cur'ous," they would say to me. They were fond of pets, those woodmen, and many a bird they and their children had in cages outside their cottages, the door being left open for them to go in and out as they pleased.

As I said before, my knowledge of Surrey Hills dates back from a considerable period of time—when the mansions of the old gentry of the land, the owners of the soil,—with their interiors furnished with solid oak and mahogany, made by hands that loved their work and did it conscientiously, and their walls covered with paintings representing some incident or other of outdoor natural life rather than the so-called pictures of *genre* or the sickly sentimentalisms of the more æsthetic world,—were the only houses to be seen. And these stood far apart,

nestling in the rich woodlands within sight of a glimpse of thin blue smoke, curling up from some glades where those who worked on their estates lived in their substantial old cottages, that had more solid oak timber in one of them than there is in a dozen of those built at the present time. They were the only signs of human life that the wanderer would see when I first came to these parts of Surrey; but time brings changes—nearly all the old gentry have gone, to the sorrow of some of us, for they were ladies and gentlemen in the fullest sense of the word. A few old families remain, bearing justly honoured names, but these might be counted on the fingers of one hand, I believe. With the old families, their old retainers the woodmen and their “post and tan” cottages have passed away. They were a hard-handed folk, but kind and homely of speech, themselves nature’s gentlemen. I have wandered many a day long with some of them, but they are now nearly all laid to rest in the quaint churchyards of the different hamlets, where they lie covered with what the foresters call their “daisy quilts.”

Loyal henchmen I knew them to be, to a man;

their regard for their employers was very genuine. One of them observed to me once, after a change of owners had taken place, "I'd sooner hev the old Squire give me one o' his jacketin's when summat had riled him a bit: massy alive! he could put it out,—'twas a real pleasure to hear him, he did rap it out so. But Lor' bless ye! all as ye'd got tu du was to stan' an' hear it all, an' say nuthin'; fur when he'd said it he'd walk away, and presently, mind ye, he'd cum back an' he'd say, 'Tom, this ere damned gout makes me say things as I didn't ought to: here's half-a-crownd fur ye; ye get on with yer work.' Hap' he'd had a word or two indoors that mornin'; bless ye! they has a rumpus, in the shape o' a word or two, now an' again, same as we has, and when they's had their say they likes one another all the better fur it, that's my 'pinion on it. Most menjous high spirity folks wus the old master and the missus; but oh, warn't they real good uns to all the likes o' we! I'd sooner hev a jacketin' from th' old Squire three times a-day than I'd hev a gold suvrin from this un. I puts up with un till I gits summat else tu du; when I gits that I leaves he quick."

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Old Tom's literally recorded declaration of his sentiments expresses the feeling of the few old woodmen's families that now remain on and about the hills. Modern mansions have been built where some of these older ones stood, or near to them—buildings of ferociously glaring red bricks and tiling, strongly relieved by the white quarterings now so very prevalent in mansions of this particular style. Time will soften the glaring tones—the sooner the better, I think, for they flash out from the surrounding woodlands, reminding me always of those scarlet fungi, of wonderful properties for those who are in the secret, that spring up, happily few and far between, in the fall of the year from the turf at the foot of the trees.

As in my descriptions I have no intention of imitating those misleading publications called guide-books, I shall indicate no particular locality; and with Hindhead and Blackdown and their "Broom dashers," or "Broom squires," we have nothing to do. These titles have been bestowed on the descendants of nomads who in past times squatted in the mighty hollows of those hills. Quite enough of the peculiar traits of their ancestors remain still



in some of the present inhabitants to indicate where they spring from. We have not sufficient space to describe all, so we follow the sage old proverb that tells us "that is best which lies nearest us," and will take, first, glorious Holmbury, with its fell of the moor, or, as it is named in all parochial documents, "Fell de Moor," with Farleigh, called locally Farley Heath, or Fair Heath—rightly named, for it is very fair to look on. It has also a history of a past time, when the Romans ruled Britain.

Close to Holmbury, springing from the valley that divides them, is Leith Hill. Local tradition speaks of it as the Stronghold of Leith, when the Romans camped on the sister hill of Holmbury. What a wealth of hills and dales, woods and streams, there is in our health-giving Holmbury! Long ago, when it was a land comparatively little known to the general public, it had a still wilder beauty. In my wanderings I have been in many an out-of-the-way spot; but for perfect rest and the feeling of a safe lodging in some far-away vast wilderness—a hiding-place from the "strife of tongues" and the contentions of men—give me Holmbury, as I knew it thirty years ago.

Rising early and going to bed early, with good plain food, keep a man trim and in full vigour when others have waxed feeble. It quickens the sight, too, this healthy life: a man who uses rod or gun as a field naturalist never needs to look twice at a thing. Such were some of the foresters of these hills and vales in the days of my youth: some of their descendants have made their mark in distant lands, where their knowledge of wood-craft has served them in good stead. They could not bear the changes here, and sought in far-away backwoods what they had lost in their own land. Raven, crow, falcon, hawk, and owl hunted here at that time. In the evening, on the top of the Holmbury moor, you could see a flight of harriers, male and female,—or, as the woodlanders term them, blue hawk and ringtail,—a most interesting sight; the grey and the brown bird flying side by side—some little distance apart, certainly, but still in a line. They are looking for no lark or pipit, nor for any of the song-thrush family, but are in quest of nobler game.

Bad luck to the blackcock, pheasant, or partridge that shows for even one brief moment in any open space; for when the quarry is sighted, the flapping

flight will be altered for a quick shoot up in the air of about twenty or thirty feet, and then down comes the hunter, and a very sure pounce it is. The black-cock is a large and powerful bird, but the needle-like claws of the harrier will make short work of him.

When they hunt partridges the tactics of the harrier are a little different. If the locality is a stubble fallow, they frighten the birds to begin with, by making them run backwards and forwards till they bunch up, cowering with fear. Then both blue hawk and ringtail set to work in earnest, and come at them with a dash.

Up spring the partridges in all directions, almost brushing the top off the stubble: all in a clutter they are, one over the other. Then the hunter's work is easy; each makes a pounce, and each has a bird.

In the bogs snipe hummed and bleated out a tissing music to their mates, and woodcocks bred in the cover by the hillsides. If the woodcock's nest was near enough to swampy ground, the little creatures were led to it; if at a distance, they were carried there and back again. This was once proved in our neighbourhood in a most convincing manner. A

woodcock flew past a cover where one of the woodmen was watching for rabbits. He mistook it for a large hawk with a quarry, fired at it, and killed his bird. To his astonishment, when he went to pick it up, he found he had shot a fine female woodcock and her young one. By the way, this member of the scolopax family trots about a great deal at night in very dry places as well as wet ones; for one fine fellow contrived to walk into a rabbit-trap set on the top of a splashed bank, where, of course, he was captured.

Our woodmen used to say, "When we wants a thing we has it;" and it was certainly the fact. They had no vulgar poaching practices, and they made no fuss, but they managed to get what they wanted. Where are those two inseparables now, I wonder,—such fast friends, yet so different in character,—"Wild Toby" and "Thirsty Chub"? or, as he was still more often called, "Drouthy Chubby." Wild Toby was a clever fellow, who could turn his hand to most things,—a good musician and a good singer, and of handsome appearance, too. As he was wont to observe, "he couldn't live nohow if he didn't go on the root now and again." Fur, fish and



feather need all look alive when Toby was on the root.

“Chubby” was the local blacksmith—a short, blear-eyed little fellow, with a face that had an absurdly pathetic expression. It was rarely clean, nor was he ever seen without his leather apron. If he was sent for, to shoe at some gentleman’s stables, off waddled Chubby, with dirty face and leather apron. He was a perfect master in his business, and made all the edged tools in use for miles round, axes and handbills. It was a common saying that you could shave yourself with Chubby’s axes and billhooks. “Nuthin’ never ails me—only thirst,” he would say. “Water ain’t no good; tea an’ such slops I can’t abide nohow; an’ small beer ain’t no use. The only thing as will take this ’ere thirst off fur a time is ale, an’ plenty of it.” He never stinted himself in that matter. Now and again Chubby would lock up the shop, and go for Toby to have what he called “a day on the quiet.” At his special request Toby would bring his clarionet, and as the music moved him, Chubby would blink his eyes, smile pathetically, and endeavour to see the bottom of a quart pot in the most expeditious manner pos-

sible. He always provided a separate one for Toby. "'Tain't no use offerin' a pot o' ale to anybody else arter I've had two pulls at it," he would say. At a certain point in the convivial proceedings the clarionet would be taken to pieces very deliberately and gravely, put into its case, and handed to the landlady, with a request that she would take very great care of it. Then, to the best of their ability, they would discuss and demonstrate the theory of the best methods of relieving thirst.

Cross-bows are supposed to be weapons of the past; yet I have seen them used by those who had made them, and very quiet and deadly weapons they were. Toby made the stock, and Chubby fitted it with steel, bow, and barrel. He also designed and made the bolts; and this is an example of the way in which they proceeded. Chubby told Toby one day, in the most matter-of-fact way possible, that "some one as he knowed wanted one o' they black-cocks."

"Is it fur he?" asked Toby, pointing to myself.

"No, it ain't; but I thinks as he'd like to go with ye, Toby, if so be as ye've no objection."

I had seen black game many a time, but never a

one killed with a cross-bow. It was early in the season, when the cock birds were playing up to attract their sober-coloured companions, the grey hens. I had marked one of their playing places the day before, when I had started five fine fellows quite by accident. It was a flat kind of green terrace which jutted out from the hillside. I had come upon them from a clump of firs above, on which they roosted if the cover was too damp for them. All birds show off more or less as the breeding season comes round, but the blackcock is a perfect adept in the art. One moment you see him with his head on a line with the ground, his wings trailed and his curved tail thrown up well over his back. With a quick spring this position is reversed, and he appears with head thrown up and well back, his wings drooped and his tail nearly touching the back of his head, showing the pure white of the under tail-coverts to great advantage. The next moment he will adopt the action of a gamecock slightly modified. One thing is certain—he is not so wary at such times as at others.

We started for the playing place before daylight, and got into hiding close to, just as things were be-

coming discernible. "The master cock will come first," whispered Toby. He'll be the best bird o' the lot ; keep your eyes open."

As the sun showed through the fir trunks down sailed the bird to his platform, where, after a little crooning and bubbling, he began to puff himself out, pouter fashion.

"Now is the time," a thud, and the grand bird falls over dead. "No harm done," says Toby, as he picks him up. "Look here !" As he holds the bolt up for my inspection I see that it is muffled. Many a hare and rabbit had that weapon quietened.

"Nothing but rank poaching !" some of our readers will say ; "and a most unsportsmanlike proceeding." I beg to state, however, that this occurred in a no-man's locality, where all had right of common and pasturage for stock.

In bygone times—before the ground-game law was passed—small hillside farmers have been obliged to leave their holdings, for the rabbits swarmed down from the waste to the cultivated parts and simply devoured the crops. Unless wild creatures are kept in check by their natural enemies, or by man himself, they will work sad mischief to all that he rears or



cultivates. The wild rabbit of the waste lands is nothing more or less than "pinwire varmint," as the rustics say ; and only fit as food for the fox and badger, the different members of the weasel family, and the birds of prey. One and all are most heartily welcome to have him. The so-called wild rabbits of a more toothsome sort, that are supplied to the markets, have in most cases some of the domesticated rabbit's blood in their veins, which, with good food, accounts for their greater size and superior edible qualities. It is a common sight to see tame rabbits—black, white, grey, and sandy—dotting about a warren. The progeny from the tame and the wild ones are the animals of the markets and the poulterers. In the days I write of, the pinwire dotters were the pest of the farmers.

The hills about Holmbury are well wooded : oak, ash, fir, mountain-ash, the quicken of the woodmen, are there. The undergrowth is in keeping with the forest-trees ; junipers, heath, bramble, dogwood, and alder, with the bracken and whortleberry plants that cover the ground thickly mile after mile, give rare cover and food to all wild creatures. The children, too, pick vast quantities of "whorts," as they call

them, for sale. In some localities these are much finer than in others : you will see some of the children, more knowing than the rest, quit their companions and make for the warm moist slopes at the foot of hills covered with a luxuriant growth of fern. Under the fronds the whole ground is black with the berries ; the youngsters just throw themselves down and fill their baskets as they lie there. Vipers, or red adders, as the bairns call them, are plentiful enough. I know that from my own observation ; but I never heard—and I have made frequent inquiries on this point—of any woodland child or grown-up person that had been really injured by one. Viper-oil—adder-ile—you would find in all the woodmen's cottages. The bottle containing it is always suspended by a leathern thong fastened round its neck, just under the gun that hangs above the fireplace. "And there they must bide, without being meddled with," the children will tell you ; "fur dad sez ef one on us meddles with they, he'll give us a quiltin' as ull last us a week—an' he wud too."

This oil is most highly valued by them as a sovereign remedy for many complaints.

"I wouldn't take two suvrins for that ere lot of

ile," remarked a woodman to me once ; " it takes a menjous lot o' adders tu git that lot o' ile frum ; an ye've got tu catch 'em fust." The oil was clear and limpid—it had the look of the best olive-oil. With a little laudanum added to it, and briskly rubbed in and about the part bitten, it is very efficacious. The reason our forester's children do not get bitten is, they know the habits of the creatures that surround them as well as they do their own : their eyes and ears have all the quickness of wild animals. They know instantly if it is a bird, mouse, or reptile that is moving ; and in the midst of their whort-picking you hear some sturdy urchin yell out, " Roost up all on ye ! there's a crawler handy,—I hear un."

Three varieties of the same species, which I have captured on these hills, I have minutely examined when alive, to the no small wonderment of the forest-folks. The process was a very simple one : as the viper coiled for the stroke I dropped my straw hat over him,—hived him, as they said. Then placing the toes of both boots on the sides of the hat rim, I gently raised a small portion of it in front. When the creature saw daylight, after that sudden plunge into darkness, he at once very cautiously poked his

head out, whereupon I nipped him behind the head with my finger and thumb. I fear, when I left those charming localities, I went credited with many uncanny qualities that I did not certainly possess.

When the sun had gone westward any one might study the habits and haunts of that giant swallow, the fern-owl or heave-jar. Fern-owls were as plentiful as pigeons about a pigeon-cote. This neighbourhood suits them to perfection, both as regards food and shelter, and for nesting purposes. The numbers that visit certain counties must be very great. Here alone, the whole forest hums with their spinning-wheel-like song. Sometimes I have lain out of doors three nights in the same week, watching their ways and their means of living. The heather was my couch, and a very fragrant and good one it makes.

Pitch Hill, Ewhurst Hill, Holmbury Hill, and Leith Hill, at the time I lived in their neighbourhood, were full of water to their very summits. The whole of the water-supply for the houses and offices, when those red mansions were built, came from the hills in pipes laid down, besides which there were fine open-air swimming-baths conveniently near. There is stone, too, of the most enduring quality—



enough, as the forest-folks were wont to say, to last "for ever and a few days over."

Leith Hill much resembles Holmbury in the general surroundings. Let any one who is fond of wild life and scenery walk from Dorking to Coldharbour; from there to Leith Hill; and from the Hill tower let him take the long green stripe down to the entrance of the wood, and on to Pitland Street. That will lead him to the base of Holmbury Hill. Then let him climb the hill and come down through the beautiful glade, with fir-woods on either side, to Fellday, or the Fell of the Moor. From Fellday he should walk to Abinger and look at its quaint church, and the time-eaten stocks just outside the churchyard gates. From Abinger he may wander past Wotton, the home of the Evelyns, and on to Westcott, on his way back to Dorking. He will not soon forget such a day, and if he be a botanist his case will not be empty. Should he prefer entomological research, he can have his fling at moth, butterfly, or beetle. On the stone-heaps from the quarries, on or under the stones, there is insect-life in innumerable varieties. For the lover of birds there are plenty to observe still, although not so

many as in past times, for the simple reason that most of the new race preserve strictly. The land is their own to do as they please with ; but where game is preserved, the keepers will tell you all varmints must be killed off. Now "varmints," as they have it, include falcons, hawks, owls, ravens, crows, rooks, magpies, jays, butcher-birds, and the poor harmless goatsucker, the heave-jar or fern-owl, in many cases. I was gravely informed by one authority in the velveteen jacket that these "sucked cows when they was asleep." I did not contradict him—his case was hopeless.

I am sorry to tell that I have seen the gable-end of a dog-kennel covered with beautiful creatures, the ornaments of the woodlands. Owls were of course conspicuous by their numbers. Brown, white, long and short eared owls were there, all spread out on the gable-end. "A rare good show" the keeper called it.

Yet the same individual told me his place was "run over, an' stunk out, wi' rats and mice." When I told him that I kept such varmints as companions, and not only played with them but talked to them, and gave them credit for having more brains and under-

standing than some people I knew, it was too much for him. In a perfect torrent of rude eloquence he gave me his opinion about owls, and all fools o' folk who kept such floppin' varmints. As his voice was raised in his excitement, his retriever walked up just to see if anything had gone wrong. Down came the man's ash stick on the poor animal's ribs, with some rough words to the effect that he'd send for him when he wanted him,—he warn't talking about him nor yet to him. I suppose the blow relieved the man's feelings. As for myself, I let him talk himself dry, and then—as it interested me to keep on friendly terms with him—I mildly suggested the fact that the neat little country inn was quite handy.

Whilst he looked through various glasses of “Irish with a slice of lemon,” in which I kept him company, his views on “owls and them as kept 'em” became very much modified; for when we parted he bade me remember that “if any o' mine went off the hooks he'd git me some more, either old uns or young uns, fur they'd young uns very near all times o' the year.”

In this statement he was perfectly correct.

When my woodland friends found out that all

the time I could spare from my business was given to looking at things, as they termed it, and making pictures of some of them, the kind souls would have made a perfect Noah's ark of my small dwelling. I had, at times, to use no small amount of diplomacy to avoid hurting their feelings by refusals to accept certain birds or beasts. At last I was compelled to tell them I had given up keeping things in the house, and I sent all my stands and cages away. Only a favourite brown owl was allowed to remain, and he perched on my knee or shoulder, no matter what time I came in of the day or the night. He learned to know my footsteps, and would watch for me like a dog.

For the last thirty years I have not used a gun ; a good field-glass has taken its place.

Besides the birds I have mentioned as being found on our hills, all the finches and the soft-billed birds are well represented, blackbirds, song and missel thrushes, ring-ousels at certain times more or less, fieldfares and redwings, wild geese, wild ducks, heron, woodcock, snipe and plover, black game, pheasants, and partridges. The woodpecker family is in full force : we have the green, and the black and white



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spotted woodpeckers, the greater and the lesser. The nuthatch and the wryneck are here; as for the cuckoos, they are all about.

Leaving beautiful Ewhurst Hill, we come down the long glade to Abinger. From here the road takes us to those hills or downs called Hackhurst. There the country has a different aspect, for the soil is different,—it is chalk land on that ridge. The fine turf is merely the facing of it, if we may term it so. Bird-life differs too on this side of the valley, and it is not so varied in character. The birds you see most frequently will be rooks, jackdaws, starlings, pigeons, wood and stock pigeons, or stock-doves, wheat-ears, and sometimes, not often, that small representative of the noble bustard—once so well known on the South Down Hills—the thick-knee or great plover, the stone curlew. He does well here, for most of the land is sheep pasture; and what with beetles, mice, frogs, and worms, to say nothing of other small trifles, he lives well. He is rarely shot, for he is one of the wariest birds in existence, or at least in this district: his large eyes tell you at once that he feeds by night as well as by day. The fields that are cultivated, those on

the top of the hills, abound in flints; in fact, the farmers will tell you they grow flints, they are continually picking them off the ground and carrying them away by waggon and cart loads. When the thick-knee makes his home here, you may as well try to find that oft-quoted needle in a haystack as to find him; he is an inveterate skulker. When danger has threatened him, I have watched him through a glass, with his head stretched out, and his body squatted on the ground as closely as a toad's.

On a large estate at the foot of one of our hills is a deserted heronry. It has been forsaken for many years. When the owners took possession, the grand birds forsook it. I met one of the old squire's retainers near the spot lately, and questioned him about them. "Ah," said he, shaking his head mournfully, "'pears to me the good uns is all gone: things is all changed, topsy-turvy like, an' the young uns don't take after the old uns—not a bit."

I like to wander there as the sun sinks, and to look at the fine old firs where the herons once built their nests. Some of the trees are far decayed, but they still stand like sentinels. The road that once

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led to a noble house is now covered with turf; the deer have given place to less noble game: where they roamed, pheasants and rabbits run about. There is the water where the heron used to fish, nearly choked with aquatic growth; and there, in the distance, is the moor with its trout stream and tiny rills as of old, where he got his feed of small trout; but the heron has gone, never, we fear, to return in any numbers. Now and again one or two have revisited the haunt of their ancestors, but they got shot for so doing. Sometimes, when the setting sun flashes on the trunks of those old trees, and lights up the water that is left open of their old fishing-place, when the mist begins to rise from the moorlands, I, too, could wish that the old gentry we used to see there so many years ago could come back once more.

## CHAPTER III.

## FIN AND FUR ON SURREY HILLS.

THE moorland rills, in which live the pigmy trout, gathering force and volume, unite and become streams. After running through the upland woods they widen in the woodland meadows, forming ponds which are nearly surrounded by copse growth. In these, fine trout thrive and grow fat; not the long-bodied trout that live in the swift stream, but short thick fellows, silvery in colour, red spots dappling their bright sides. "They be hog-backed uns, an' no mistake," said a rustic fisher, as I was passing along the edge of the wood one evening.

This man was cutting extraordinary capers with his heavy hob-nailed boots on the grass, threshing away most vigorously at the same time with his hat.



“Now then, Marksman,” said I,—that was the nickname he went by,—“what’s up? Have you got St Vitus’s dance, or is it a wasp’s nest you’ve stepped into?”

“I ain’t got one nor yet t’other; I’m gettin’ owlets.” As he said this he held up a ghost moth between his finger and thumb. Then he placed it in his empty tobacco-box, in which were three or four more of the same sort.

“That’ll do fur to-night,” he remarked. “Will ye come?” Then he produced from his pocket a fishing-line wound round a short piece of hazel. I nodded.

“Are ye going to bide here, or are ye coming in the cover with me?”

I chose to remain where I was, for from the open side of the pond I could note all his proceedings, which were always of an interesting nature.

From some brambles he pulled out a stick about five feet long, forked at the end where it had been cut. The end of the line was securely tied just below the fork; the rest of it was wound round the outside of the fork, leaving about a foot of strong gut hanging down; to this a by no means small

hook was attached. Then from his tobacco-box he pulled out one of his owlets, and, evidently knowing well what he was about, he placed the moth. "I'm agoing to wiggle fur 'em," said he. Then he made his way into the cover, with such gentleness of movement that I only knew of his whereabouts by seeing him look over the splashed hazel bank of the pond on the other side, the light throwing his shadow behind him. Marksman was knowing in all details; but he had an original way of proceeding that always had great fascination for me, and I learned many a "wrinkle" from him. He very quietly unwound the line by turning his forked stick the reverse way as it neared the water, and I could see him gently jerking it up and down to imitate the flight of the insect. Then he let it drop on the water, close to the bank, and gave his owlet a motion as if it were struggling to rise from the pond, after falling in.

Another wiggle, and then came a sound, sock! The stick was raised, the line as tight as any harp-string, and up the bank went a trout, being out of sight in the most extraordinarily quick fashion. The next moment, with a grin all over his face, Marksman held it up for inspection; a real beauty it was.

As silently as before he then moved on to another place, where the performance was repeated with equal success.

"I see one of they owlets drop in, one evenin' as I was looterin' round," said he. "I thought over it fur a spell, an' since then I've found it act most uncommon."

But luck changes. Marksman had only seen that particular moth fall in, and when his owlets failed him he was at a loss to know what to use next. Worms or live bait the trout in that particular pond refused entirely. Meeting him again on the moor one day, I asked how his fishing was getting on. "Oh," replied he, "I gi'n it up. I thought as I'd found out a way to clear that thear pond, but 'tain't no go arter all. I shell hev to wait till they owlets cums round here agin."

Marksman," said I, "if I find you a kind of owlet that will catch trout out of that pond, and last you all the season up to running time, will you keep it to yourself?"

"Now——"

"There, that's all right—give me your precious tackle; you don't leave that at home, I know."

"I wonders what noover ye be up tu now," he observed, handing over his fishing-gear.

After a fresh whipping of the hook on to the gut, I made a body from a new wine-bottle cork, and securely fixed it on the hook fore and aft. In it I put two small dark beads for the eyes. In place of wings I whipped on the beautifully pencilled tips of the feathers from the wings of the white owl. "Use it just before the dark closes in," I said, in giving the thing to Marksman.

He used it with good result. Many a fine trout in that pond was taken by the strange insect, which, when not in requisition, was religiously kept in a domino-box in some cunningly contrived pocket of his old velveteen jacket. No profane eye was allowed to rest on that treasure, and from the date of the unearthly insect's manufacture I rose many inches in Marksman's estimation. It is still treasured up, and when its owner has had a little over three pints of ale he will tell the company that he has "summat in a box as 'll fetch 'em out on it, when it's dark." After another pint, he will state in the most defiant manner, and perfectly unsolicited, "No, I ain't a-goin' tu show it tu nobody,—what du ye think?



No, nor yit tell who made it. No, I shan't!" his voice rising to a perfect yell. Poor Marksman!

There is plenty of water on both sides of the valley belonging to the Hackhurst downs. The streams run in different directions, part finding their way to the Wey, the rest emptying themselves into the Mole. In these are certain pools and ponds hidden in nooks and corners that are full of fine fish. Before the property changed owners I and many others were allowed to fish and shoot there, but that is a thing of the past. The rod is placed on one side now; there are too many of those unsightly square boards about, telling one that any person attempting to catch anything the size of a sprat will be prosecuted. Ay, ugly notice-boards disfigure the stream and road sides, the beautiful woods and the wild hillsides. Yet I do not remember that the kindness and confidence of our old gentry was ever abused. A simple intimation to keep away from certain spots on and about the estates was sufficient.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In those days, before so many railroads were open, crowds of trippers were not able to overrun the beautiful country-side, tearing up prim-roses, roots, and flowers, and carrying on a system of wholesale destruction wherever their profane hands and feet went.

"What are you young fellows about?" one old squire would say; "fishing, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's all very well, but what kind of fish?"

"Perch, roach, dace, and gudgeon, sir."

"Show me your baskets, and take your lines from the water that I may see your baits. . . . Yes, yes, quite right."

We lifted our caps to him as he turned to go again,—an act of politeness which the courteous old gentleman returned instantly in kind.

"Let my trout alone—don't go where they are;" that was the only restriction he placed on our movements. We respected it always, for we liked and honoured him well.

Dabchicks, or little grebes, bred in one spot, I knew. The pool was not larger than a duck-pond, but it was clear and deep, and full of fine green weeds. I had never noticed any fish, particularly, on account of the thickness of these. One evening my companion was waiting for a shot at a dabchick—we had come for other game—when a rise up in the weeds made us put our guns quickly up to the shoulder, thinking it was some water-bird diving;

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but out jumped some fine roach, and a great pike after them. He was one of the brightest, and for his length the thickest, pike I had ever seen. We looked at each other, dabchicks were forgotten, and our only thought was how to get at the fish. What to do we did not know, for if the pike ran into the masses of weed a rod was useless,—no clothes-prop would have pulled him out. So we agreed to sleep on it; and during the night my friend had a happy inspiration. Next morning he showed me the most rough-and-ready contrivance that it has ever been my lot to see. He had a large hank of light olive-green cord, thin but very strong, such as you would use to hang a good-sized picture by. To this form of line two feet of wire was firmly lashed, and this again was securely lashed—whipped would by no means express it—to a double hook. The wire was of the same kind and of equal thickness as that used to catch hares with. As my companion observed, “It would pull the very old one himself out, if he got the hooks in his gullet.” The next business was to catch bait: this was easily done, for large roach abounded in the stream close at hand. After the bait had been fixed, my friend

took it in his hand and threw it, as he would have done a stone, into the first open space between the weeds near us; the remainder of the picture-cord lay on the top of the weeds. I had no faith in the proceedings myself, the tackle being so very rough, but my companion evidently had. Those pike had surely never seen a line before; they must have been the most unsophisticated of the pike family, for, before five minutes had passed away, the picture-cord began to shoot over the top of the weeds at a most rapid rate, and then it stopped. "All right," said my friend; "he's pouching it. I shall give him ten minutes, and then I'll tickle his gizzard." He did that with a vengeance, jerking the pike sharply enough to pull a donkey up to a standstill. The pike was so alarmed and amazed, never having been served so in his life before, that he sprang clean out of the water like a trout, came down head first into a mass of weeds, and buried himself in them like a pig in straw.

"You've lost him!" I cried.

"Not I," rejoined my friend; "he's safe enough. Come out of it!" and with that he hauled a mass



of weeds ashore that would have overfilled a bushel measure. When we parted the weeds, in the centre of them was one of the most silvery, thick 8-lb. pikes that we had ever seen or ever shall see.

After that we found more pike in that secluded bit of water, all of the same stamp and quality. Numbers of them were hauled out by that happy contrivance of picture-cord and snare-wire. We two meet one another at times now, and no matter what the topic of conversation may be, it is sure soon to drift round to that lonely pool; and it is our united opinion that if we had allowed those fat pike to remain there, they must infallibly have died eventually of apoplexy.

From the stream that ran by this pond little rills flowed through the lush water-meadows, which were covered in their season with the king-cups, the yellow iris, and many other plants that flourish in such localities.

The rills were clear as crystal, having sandy bottoms, about a foot in depth. Here loach of large size were to be found in abundance; six inches in length they were, the finest baits pos-

sible for the pike and perch of the river Mole. I have tried all the various baits there, but the very best were the fine stone loaches from these rills. Miller's-thumbs, bullheads, or bull-trouts, were plentiful; with them we did not interfere, although, like the loach, they are excellent eating. If you make a skeleton of the miller's-thumb, the head looks curiously monkey-like.

Water-shrews had their home here. I have spent hours in watching the habits of these little creatures. Where the rills widened out into ditches the water-rats, or water-voles, had their holes. Two varieties I knew there—the common brown vole and the black water-vole. The latter is smaller than his more common relative, and, when he is sitting on the bank, looks like a small ball of dark velvet. I saw one lately on the banks of the same small ditch.

I have seen the pike, too, swim up that brook in the way that the late Richard Jefferies observed them in his own county. As a fellow field-naturalist, I would pay my tribute of praise, and express my perfect appreciation of the work of one of the most minute and truthful observers that England has

ever known. He has now solved those secrets of nature, doubtless, that puzzled him here. As to myself, I am at the present time nearer sixty than fifty years of age; I enjoy first-rate health; my eyesight, thank God! is as keen as it was at twenty-five; and I am as capable of a twenty miles' trudge over the moorlands as I was in the days of my youth. From my childhood I have studied natural life, but not for profit; until a few years ago I never wrote a line about what I knew or had seen for the public eye to rest on. And so I feel competent, as one of nature's children, to give an opinion as to the value of the work of my lamented fellow naturalist, Richard Jefferies.

Let us climb the hills once more from Hackhurst downs on our way to Ranmore common. From here a bridle-path passes in front of the mansion of beautiful Denbies. We have one of the most lovely views of woodland scenery that it is possible for any one to look on. There is the whole length of the Holmesdale valley, with the hills on either side of it. We see mansions thickly dotted in all directions, where some years ago there was not a house to be seen. Retracing our steps from this point,

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and walking over the common and on to West-humble, we find Box Hill fronting us. In spite of the changes following in the wake of fresh bricks and mortar, delightful remnants of what has been are still to be found. One spot I often visit,—a large pool, a half-choked-up mill-pond, with a current running through the middle of it, and bare expanses of soft slub, where flag and iris, tasselled grasses and rushes, and stunted willow growth, flourish most luxuriantly. This pool must possess some peculiar attraction for all the birds of passage that affect such localities, either for purposes of breeding or for food; for here, in their migrating seasons of spring and autumn, come curlew, plover, dunlins—these, by the way, have a great portion of their full breeding plumage about them—sandpipers, the common or willy wicket, and the rarer green sandpiper. Geese come at longer intervals, ducks are common, teal visit it now and again, terns frequently, and gulls that, from some reason or another only known to themselves, are tempted to stay their flight for a time and to rest here—a treacherous enough resting-place to some of them. Snipe, also, visit the place—wisps of them zigzag up at times,



according to the season; and the heron comes to see what he can bayonet with that bill of his. Thirty-five years ago that pond and the streams that fed it teemed with fish of all kinds; the perch and the pike ran very large there. It was not to be wondered at, taking the vast supply of food into consideration. I have seen shoals of young carp swim up a quiet part of one of the feeding-streams and down again. As to the roach and gudgeon and the loaches, their name was, in truth, legion.

There was a tradition about the pond in connection with a secret outlet said to run from it into the water-meadows. In most traditions there is a grain, at least, of truth. An individual I knew well—he is still alive, although sadly grizzled and battered with the wear and tear of a very nomadic way of living—who was of an inquiring turn of mind, set to work to solve the problem of the exact whereabouts of that secret outlet. He found it, but he kept the knowledge of it to himself.

This man dealt with the miller for siftings, pea-meal, and other matter for the fattening of his porkers; so that he generally had one sack, if not more, in his house, with the names of the miller and

his mill marked on it in full. Not only was the outlet discovered by him, but he opened it and let out the water. So cleverly did he manage this, that by the morning the pond was full again to the edge, without anything to tell how the affair had been contrived. I was rarely in bed after four o'clock in the morning nine months out of the twelve, and on that particular morning my work took me past the mill-pond at my usual early hour. To my astonishment I found the water-meadow nearest the pond turned into a shallow lagoon, in which great pike and other fish were rushing about like rockets, making the golden tops of the king-cups nod about in a most extraordinary fashion. I suppose it was very wrong of me, but how I laughed and rubbed my hands in glee to see the fun—and the sight of that harlequin-like fellow, with his trousers tucked up to his knees, a “three-speened fork,” as he termed it, in his hand, as busy as a bee in a tar-pot, harpooning the fish with the greatest ease. He had some fine specimens of pike already laid out on the grass when I arrived. As I stood there enjoying the scene, who should appear but the village constable returning from his beat of night duty. Nothing

daunted, Harlequin saluted him with a cheery good morning.

"What game is this, then?" queried the guardian of the peace and of the place.

"A werry nice un I calls it," replied Harlequin, as he harpooned another pike, that I judged at least to be twelve pounds in weight. "You see," he continued, "he," jerking his thumb in the direction of the mill-house, "keeps a lot of ducks, as you knows well; an' he's lost a lot o' the young uns lately with these 'ere jacks, so he comes tu me rather late last night, an' says he to me, 'I shell let some o' the water off, quite unbeknown to anybody,—some o' they jacks is sure tu find their way out into the medder: yo' git up early, as soon as 'tis light, an' settle some on 'em off.' He says that tu me, an' I'm a-doin' of it. An' he give me one o' his sacks fur to put 'em in; then, says he, if anybody cums an' interferes with yer, they'll see as ye're doin' it fur me. An' all the jacks as yo' settles yo' can keep fur yerself! But, bless ye! what should I du with such a lot? Now, look here; ye just take this here big un home with yer—ye'll find it fine eatin'!"

The guardian of the night accepted that splendid pike, and marched off a happy man—the pike on one side, balanced by his staff on the other. As I noted the broad tail of the fish flopping against his leg from the inside of his coat, “Pat Haggerty’s wedding” popped into my head—

“Where the bride she was dressed in  
A short-bodied gown,  
Jist made in the fashion,  
The tail hangin’ down.”

As soon as the constable was out of sight, we both roared with laughter.

To this day the real state of the case is not known, nor where that very mysterious outlet is. The receiver of the pike has passed over to the majority long ago, and the miller was never the wiser. I kept poor Harlequin’s secret, as I have done many another of the sort in my day.

Of all our Surrey mills, pleasantest to me are the Woodland valley mills, shut out as they are from all sounds of traffic—cool and quiet spots surrounded by trees. A flight of old brick steps led down from the mill-head into the garden, and then you saw the miller’s house,—one I often visited and rested in.



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The dusty outside look did not extend to the interior of the house, for the low-ceilinged rooms with beams running across them were kept in perfect order. The furniture was of old-fashioned mahogany, solid and good; and the miller and his wife were a grave kindly couple, quite in keeping with their surroundings. He was not given to much expression in the matter of religion, and he did not go to church so regularly as his wife, a quiet staid woman, who might be seen walking through the beech-woods two miles to church every Sunday morning. She had a profound respect for the clergy and all relating to the Established Church; he had a hearty regard and admiration for his landlord, the squire. He had stronger opinions about fishing than he had on religious questions. I remember his finding a fellow fishing with the spoon-bait for pike, and the man was quickly made to wind up and go, for he would have no dumb creatures tortured; one hook, he said, was quite enough. With respect to the mill-stream proper, independently of the mill-pool, his ideas and sentiments were of the most conservative nature. The trout were for the squire and the squire's friends only. Even to hint at a day's pos-

sible fishing was enough to get you excommunicated by the miller. No keeper ever watched his coveys of partridges with more jealous care than that miller did the trout that lived in his portion of the stream. Yet he was once tricked out of a day's fishing by a supposed clergyman, compared with whom my poor Harlequin was a saint. I shall never forget the wrath and disgust with which he related the story to me. I give it as the miller told it, a few days after it occurred.

"Just after breakfast there came a rap at the door, which mother answered. Then she told me that there was a strange gentleman, a very respectable-looking clergyman, inquiring for me. I went out, and he at once held out his hand, saying, 'Good morning, Mr Dash,—good morning to you ; I must introduce myself. I am the vicar of G——, and my old college friend, your worthy and esteemed landlord, wrote me an invitation to come and have a day's fishing over here. He knows my weakness for the gentle sport, and he said I was to come to you, with his compliments, for instruction where it was best to go, and about other matters concerning the limits of his water.' He said, too, as how he

was going to dine with the squire that same evening, and that he should then be able to give an account of his success through the day.

“So I left the mill to my chap, and showed the stranger all the best places where I knew the heavy fish lay, and then left him to it. About ten o’clock I went to see how he was getting on. The fellow could fish, no doubt about that. I looked at him as he threw, and I thought to myself, if all parsons is like you they’re uncommon active with trout, whatever they may be with men: he’d got eight or nine good ones already.

“‘You see,’ says he, ‘thanks to you, my good friend, I’m labouring in a fruitful vineyard. The flesh is weak, though, this morning, and in the excitement caused by the prospect of a day’s fishing, and seeing my old college friend, I omitted to bring the needful refreshment with me. Do you think there is a possibility of anything being procured in the neighbourhood—any good inn near, to which I could go?’

“I told him there was none nearer than two miles away, but that he would be heartily welcome to anything there might happen to be in our house:

mother has a weakness for parsons, you know, so I was all right there.

“‘Do you say home-brewed, my dear friend?’ he went on; ‘never since my boyhood have I tasted that fine drink of Old England. I feel my youth come back at the very name of it. Yes; gladly will I accept of your hospitality;’ and a lot more stuff of the same sort—about lines in pleasant places and the like. Well, mother laid the cloth in the best room, and she even put her own best bib and tucker on, in honour of the clerical gentleman. He washed his hands, and in he came; looked it over, and then said a grace. After that he set to work, praised our beer, called it nectar for the immortals, emptied the jug,—three pints it held,—and praised mother’s bread and cheese too. He talked us right over, both of us—asked us if we went to church. I told him mother did, wet or fine. Then he got on his legs and gave us a bit of a sermon on true religion and outward forms, and the grand old Church of England, finishing up with Christian charity, which was, he said, just what he had had from us that day. ‘On my return to my vicarage,’ he said, ‘I



will at once send, for your acceptance, one of the most costly Bibles that the town of G—— can supply; and may peace and plenty rest on this house for evermore.' Mother cried a bit, he brought it all out so solemn like. 'Now, my kind friends,' he finished up with, 'I am but a humble shepherd of the flock, but you have my blessing. I will now proceed to fish again.' There was some more stuff about the partner of my joys, and he trusted of few sorrows, and then he took his leave.

"I went with him up-stream, telling him not to fish in the other water, and then we shook hands. As he pulled out his handkerchief to wipe his face, out came a short, dirty clay-pipe, a regular pot-house pipe, not even such a one as you and me might use. That struck me curious like. 'I'll watch you, my clerical gentleman, a bit,' I said to myself, and instead of going home I slipped round another way. Well, he was over on the other ground, where he'd been told not to go, like a shot, and had a fine one from there, quick. Then I showed myself, and told him he'd no right there. 'It's all right, my friend,' said he; 'the owner of this property is also a friend of mine. I will leave

the fish at his door as I pass, on my way to the Hall.'

"Said I, 'I'm going that road myself, and I will carry it for you.'

"'No, no, my dear friend. I could not let it be a burden to you, especially after your great hospitality to me.'

"That did not quite satisfy me, but I let him start, and then followed him up. He gave me the double: he did not go the house road, so I made for the way to the station, where a man told me he had just met a parson running along, full trot. He was not in the station, and I made for the public. There I found our clerical humbug sitting down, drinking grog, that same clay-pipe in his mouth; and as I live he was actually singing, 'Catch 'em alive, oh! catch 'em alive!'

"He could not see me where I stood in the bar—he was inside the parlour. 'I'll catch you alive just now, my gentleman,' I said, and I waited for him to come out into the street. There I fixed him.

"'You canting villain!' I cried, 'what do you mean by this swindle?'

"Looking me full in the face, he said, 'My dear

friend, permit me to suggest that you are labouring under some strange delusion. I am afraid that you have somewhat overstepped the bounds of prudence by too free indulgence in intoxicating liquor. Allow me to go my way in peace.'

"That so riled me that I took off my coat; he bolted, I after him. He could run, but so could I; and just as he was turning into the station he had to accept a little more of my hospitality in the shape of a kick that heaved him off the pavement. Then I left him."

"And what did mother say?" I asked, when the miller had finished his story.

"Why, it made her that mad and cantankerous, she did not go to church for some weeks, but took to the little chapel instead. She's got over it now though, but I ain't."

. . . . .  
On the borders of a trout stream, close to a farm, I know a spot well where a vixen littered that was well tended by Master Reynard. Very soon after the cubs had done sucking, twenty-five ducks were missing from the farm. They had gone down to the stream, and never returned again. So close was

the earth to a public footpath, that persons out for a stroll used to stop and watch the vixen and her cubs at play.

One morning one of the cubs was found dead, close to the earth. From certain signs on the ground round about him, there could not be the least doubt that some person or persons unknown had committed the awful crime of fox-murder. It might have been done by way of a gentle hint to Master Reynard and his family that it would be well to leave the remainder of the ducks alone.

Although the fox has grace of sanctuary allowed him by some for their own purposes, yet he has ever been a bone of contention: he has had many a curse heaped on his head, and has been the cause of more bickerings and ill-feeling among certain classes than any other of our wild creatures.

If only the same protection had been awarded to the badger, it would be well for our farmers, large and small. May he long have his home on our Surrey hillsides. I confess to a great weakness for this frolicsome bear-like little creature.

One morning last summer (1890), I was out for a stroll through the woods, when a man hailed me



from the door of a cottage that stood just on the outskirts of one of them. He told me he had got a queer critter that had come to his garden, and to his mind it was very like a little pig—in fact, “fust off he reckoned it was one o’ his young snorkers hed got out. He’s gone to his home now,” he added; “it’s close handy to my garden. About seven of an evenin’ he cums up reg’lar; I be mortal cur’ous about it—can ye tell us what it is?”

At about seven o’clock I made my way gently up to the edge of the man’s garden, and it was not long before the “snorker-like critter” made its appearance. He seemed to have no fear—he had evidently never been disturbed since he first made his home close to; and had he not been attracted by the grunts of the cottager’s young snorkers, his proximity would never have been suspected. As it was, he gambolled about among the fern in the full joy of his nature, perfectly fearlessly—a strange combination of the bear and the pig in all his movements. If you have only seen the badger in a zoological collection, you have no idea what the creature is when he enjoys perfect liberty. After eating something he had rooted up, our friend

dashed down into the open meadow adjoining the wood.

"What in the name o' wonder be it?" asked the man.

"A badger, and a fine fellow too."

"Will he du any mischief to the crap in the garden?"

"Not he," I replied.

"Then I shan't meddle with un. I likes to see un cut his capers. Now what do he live on?"

"Mice, beetles, snails, and wasps' nests that he digs out."

"What—wapses! he's a good un. Cuss them things! they du work my fruit. Anything else do he eat?"

"Yes, mushrooms."

"Do he? he wunt hev 'em all, then, ef he stops here till they cums out."

"He will kill and eat hedgehogs too."

"Then he's a right good un. I shan't meddle with he."

For reasons of my own I did not tell our friend that the creature would also eat rabbits. I knew the man had the privilege of catching all that visited

his ground. Nor did I warn him that his pullets might fare badly if one of them happened to stray near the badger's quarters when he was hungry. In my pursuit of natural history studies, I have found it often best not to enter into any subject too minutely with the unlearned. One is apt to be the loser by so doing. "Live and let live" is my motto.

After interviewing the badger I inspected his home: it was a very pleasant and secure one, under the roots of a clump of firs, on a sandy knoll, within one minute's walk of our friend's back-door. The children had noticed it first, and told their father about a little strange pig they had run after. This proves that it is only when driven by persecution that wild creatures fear man.

Polecats, stoats, and weasels are now anything but common among us. They do certainly exist in remote spots, but not in the numbers I can remember they did years ago. The capture or killing of the largest member of the tribe—the marten excepted—is a very rare circumstance now. If the present exportation of stoats and weasels to the colonies continues—7s. 6d. and 5s. are offered for each live specimen—for the purpose of exterminating the

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rabbits that were foolishly introduced there, we shall suffer from a plague of rats and mice. Stoats and weasels kill enormous numbers of these, only for the sake of their blood.

To return to the point we left, near the valley mill-pond. As you pass over Box Hill you come to Headley Walton and Epsom heaths or downs, the crest of these hills. From this line of country you begin to near the great metropolis: you see now far too much brickwork about to call it wild scenery, although the hills are still near. Primitive nature in her luxuriance must be sought farther afield, in the region I have tried faintly to indicate.



## CHAPTER IV.

## A SURREY RIVER.

*I.—The Woodland Mole.*

THE sullen Mole—the burrowing Mole—the winding Mole—such are the titles that have been given to our river: but there is one more fitting than any of these, and that is the woodland Mole. Go where you will along its course, woodlands surround you and it. For thirty years I have been familiar with the river—the whole length of it—from close to its source to where it finally empties itself into the Thames near Hampton Court.

Those who only know it near the town of Dorking have probably noted nothing particularly striking about it: to them it may appear only a sluggish run of water overshadowed by fine trees which grow on

and about the banks, and in the meadows through which it passes. Only those who have roamed with rod and gun, by crossways and paths unknown to, and unheard of by, the general public, can tell the beauties of the woodland Mole, as it winds its way past mills and farm homesteads, through meadows and park lands—now and again opening out in broad reaches, then lost to sight for a time in thicket and tangle.

In years past I had permission to wander along its banks, and to fish there in places which were closed to the general public. The river is now still more strictly closed,<sup>1</sup> with the exception of the public paths and the highroads which run over and along it. More is the pity: all things change, however, and with fresh owners fresh regulations are made. After all, the ground is their own, and they have perfect right to do what they please with it.

One spot, beautiful both to artist and angler, I

<sup>1</sup> There has recently been litigation concerning the right of the public to fish and row in the lower reaches of the river Mole between Cobham and Esher, but that does not affect the part of which our paper treats. A gentleman who owned adjacent land got the benefit of a grant from the Crown of the bed of the river itself, and barred the passage with a chain. This a proprietor of boats for hire broke down as often as it was set across.

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have visited often ; sometimes with sketch-book in hand, but far oftener with the rod, for it was once a perfect resort for the angler. A trout stream ran there, through a moor covered with all kinds of moorland vegetation. Oh the joy of that pure trout stream, when one had a pliant rod and the finest line that it was possible to procure ! The fish were not large ; it was a rare thing to get one over a pound, and most of them were only half that weight. But such beauties ! Plump and well shaped, gold and white, with crimson spots ; and when hooked, as mettlesome as game-cocks. Ten feet or so the stream was at the widest parts, in others only three or four ; the sides in many places were covered in with low alder and willow brush ; and standing in the clear water, or dip, dip, dipping into it, were the sedges. Old alder and willow stumps had rotted there, and over them the river ran in miniature waterfalls and whirlpools. About these stumps were the favourite holds for trout ; there the water was deep. When such fish as minnows wriggled over, or insects dropped off the sedges, the little swirl carried them round to the sides, where the trout made short work of them.

Now and then some half-pounder would rush up the little fall, and turn again, showing his bright sides to perfection,—a most tantalising sight, even with the rod in your hand. Seeing a fish is not catching him: there is a wide difference between looking at him in the water and seeing him in your basket.

The orthodox method of capturing trout is with the fly, natural or artificial. I am a sceptic as to the success of this in many cases, having tried both sorts on this stream with very exasperating results. In the first place, it was a jerky little stream, and it twisted about here, there, and everywhere, according to the rift in the spongy moor. And then the trout did not take kindly to flies, at least not those on the angler's line. It is so sometimes; they will not take the fly in a dashing style, and, as a natural consequence, your fish is only just touched in the lip. Up he springs, as though he intended to leave the stream for good and all; but he alters his mind, goes down head first, darts under his rotten stump, and rubs the hook out of his lip quick. Your rod straightens, your line comes back to you, and your trout is gone. You may move on to the next likely



spot after that, and think matters over calmly, if you can.

We think the matter over somehow, and it ends in our laying down the rod and lighting the pipe. Fishing is done with for a time, and we will find out what their food, their principal food, is. The problem is soon solved. They have caterpillars, grubs, and other creeping things from the low alder and willow growth, and the bogland worms. It is a favourite pitch for snipe just here. The miller knows that well; never does he miss coming to the trout stream after the first frosts have touched things. And many worms must get into the water one way or another, particularly when the little rills from the ploughed lands run into the stream. So we decide to give up the fly in favour of the worm. We have some with us, bright, lively red worms—for we intended to try for perch as well as for trout. Shifting our tackle, and baiting with a nice worm, we very cautiously approach the bank, keep out of sight, and throw sideways up the stream, just above a little fall. The worm drops over naturally; there is a tug-tug, and we have him—no mistake about it this time; no amount of danc-

ing and somersault-throwing will get that hold loose, and after two or three turns he is landed on the grass—a good half-pounder.

As we come back to the mill-pool we pick up another, nearly the same size, and feel contented ; for the stream is a short one, on the miller's land at least. The trout do not care for the pond, as there pike abound. Turning a bend, we are in front of the pond, and the old house and mill : both lie behind its bank, low down, sleeping in the sun.

The pond is fringed round with rush and flag, willows and alders of low growth—the haunt of the heron, and the home of the moor-hen and the rail. Generations of millers have lived here ; a silvery tint, the flour-dust of many years, has settled on it ; the very slabs and tiles on the roof, even the chimney-stacks, are grey. Noble elms at the back, close to the mill-yard, throw the old buildings out in fine relief : it is a place to lull one to rest—a very sleepy man's hollow, where poet or artist might dream the days away. There is no noise of traffic to and fro—only the rumble of the miller's carts as they occasionally come in and go out, and the soothing click-click-clack of the old mill-wheel. The

great attraction to me was the flood-gate hole, with its grey timbers and flooring of massive slabs. The walls on one side were composed of stones built up without any regularity, as was the fashion long ago, just as they had come to hand. The mortar had crumbled, leaving cracks where ferns and mosses of many kinds had taken root and flourished—dipping their fronds into the water, and swaying to and fro, as little streams trickled from the sluice-gates. There, too, were lichens—yellow, white, and grey. Dragon-flies darted hither and thither over the pool, ever ready to devour any insect that might come in their way. Wasp, bee, or butterfly—no matter which—makes portion of a meal for them. Even Lord Hornet himself is not safe from their powerful jaws. The spot is a famous one for perch; they dearly like old walls and timbers, for in them they find two things necessary for their wellbeing—food and shelter. There is a vast amount of insect life in the cracks of those lichen-covered and moss-grown walls, as well as water-snails that cling and cluster upon the submerged stones.

Even as we look over the old flood-gate rails, we see a shadowy form rise up from below, and a fine

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perch, with all his spines raised, and his red fins working, dashes at a beetle that has tumbled off a fern-leaf, and is kicking and spinning round on his back, in vain efforts to raise himself from the water. One gulp, and Mr Perch vanishes again in the same warlike manner in which he made his appearance. That sight has roused our destructive inclinations to the utmost; the top joint of the rod is altered, for he fights to the last, and he is a good fish. His mouth is a wide one, so two nice fat worms will suit him. All being ready, the bait is dropped into the run of the sluice, and carried round by the current to the side of the old wall. Bob, bob, bob, goes the egg-shaped cork which we have as float; and then it is lost sight of—he has taken it nicely, and now we have him, but not on the bank. He has a hole somewhere in that wall where he lives. To prevent his reaching this, we give a little gentle force; the rod bends to it and he does not like it, for he makes a rush and springs from the water, showing what a fine fellow he is, barred like a zebra. Again he dives for deep water, and we wake him up once more. A sharp turn or two, his white belly shows, and we land him on the moss-covered edge of the



mill-pool. He will weigh a good pound and a half: there are many, to our knowledge, in this very pool that would scale over two pounds; but these very ancient individuals are most careful, and are well acquainted with the wily and deceitful ways of those who fish for them. From half a pound to a pound is the nicest size for table purposes. After catching a couple more, about half a pound each, we leave the mill-pool, and cross the wooden bridge that spans the stream where it empties itself into the Mole.

Would that I could do justice to that bit of water! Picture to yourself shallows and quiet holes under the banks, the moss-grown stones visible through the clear water. Here and there are sandy spaces where the gudgeon swim to and fro, coming to their stronghold in the hole under the roots of the old willow. The trees on both sides of the stream are like the elms at the back of the mill, fine-grown trees.

The elms are the beginning of the trees that stand on each side of the sparkling water. Oaks, elms, ash-trees, and willows, intermingled, shade the stream without closing it in, so that there is good fishing room.

A dozen or so of gudgeon will be all we care

about; they are rightly named fresh-water smelts. This particular stream is noted for very fine ones; it is a good food-stream, and there is a vast difference in waters, as regards this; in some the fish are small, owing to the scarcity of nourishment. For one thing, this one is well sheltered; and insect life, in one shape or another, is abundant. The gudgeon, being a bottom feeder, grubs away at all the small creatures that are to be found in so favourable a locality. Bright flashes of sunlight come through the foliage and the tree-trunks; on the sandy places close to the edge the beautiful yellow wagtails are daintily tripping and pecking at the insects. On one of the willow-branches that nearly dips into the water a kingfisher is perched, his head cocked knowingly on one side, waiting for a fish of the right size to come near him. As we move on, a bird shoots off from some stones and pebbles. It is the summer snipe of the miller and his son—properly speaking, the common sandpiper. Not that it is common about here; he is so called to distinguish him from his near relative, the green sandpiper, which bird I have seen in the same locality.

To return to our gudgeon, however, we make alterations in our bait, and come to their feeding-ground, or—speaking as a fisherman—their swim. All being ready, we rest the rod on a bough and cut a long stick, with which, a few yards above, just round a bit of a bend, we poke about, vigorously but quietly, near the bank, so as to thicken the water. This drifts down to the gudgeon's swim; food comes with it, and the fish make for that. For about twenty minutes we are busy, and then we tackle up, having secured a dozen and a half beauties—not a bad day's sport, as it is only five o'clock, so the afternoon is yet young.

Our way home will take us by the side of the Mole, which we reach by crossing a long meadow. There the scene is completely changed; sullen stretches of deep water alternate with shallows, which are fringed with sedges, huge water-docks, bulrushes, and various water-tangle—overshadowed by great trees, principally oaks, whose twisted roots are in many places in the water. They stood farther away at one time, but year after year the river when flooded cuts and undermines, so that the banks at last give way, and the trees come into the river.

Hundreds of rills, drains, and little streams run into the Mole in all directions, mile after mile; gullies run through meadows, ploughed lands, and thickets,—eight and ten feet deep they are, and in many places more. Their sides are a tangled network of roots and stubs, with a dribbling stream of water running at the bottom, crossed here and there by wooden bridges heavily planked—two or three planks wide, as the case may be, firmly butted on each side; whilst the rails are of a stoutness that does not seem called for—at least so the stranger might think, looking at them in the bright summer time. If he chanced to be there when the autumn rains come down, he would take a different view of the matter; for the water comes off the hills and the clay-lands with a rush, filling the gullies, and covering the rustic bridges up to the top rails—carrying all before it with a roaring rush, and flooding all the woodland meadows. Any one getting into the river then would be drowned to a certainty, for he would be inextricably entangled in the network of roots.

One morning, when I had business of immediate importance to attend to, my path led me along and



across the Mole, and the river was in flood. For more than a mile I splashed through on the high-road till I got to the ford where a bridge was. The way-pole told plainly, by the marks on it which were under water, that crossing here was out of the question. I knew a place farther up where the ground was higher, so getting through a hedge, I made for it. There the water was within a foot of the top rail. In the meadow four farm-labourers were standing close to the edge of the water, and I asked one of them if this was the only place where I could cross?

"What do 'ee mean by crass? Ye wunt crass over there, I reckuns—no, thet ye wunt; it's impossible."

"Are you waiting to cross?" I asked.

"Yes, we be; an' we will wait, if 'tis fur a week, afore we goes over there. Do 'ee think as we wants to be drowned? Why, a hoss couldn't go over there."

"Well, I must, though, some way or other."

"Don't 'ee act the goat now; 't wud be sheer fule-hardness an' temtin' Pravedunce ter try it."

"Can I go back the way I have come, then?"

"No, yer can't, fur the water have riz t'other way now; yer can't git back agin, more can't we. We means bidin' here till it falls agin, if we stays all day an' night too; so ye'll hev ter bide with us I reckuns."

"If that is the case, I am going over it if the water reaches up to my neck, and it will not do that."

Taking off my boots and slinging them round my neck, I made for the bridge, being confidently assured by the four worthy fellows that "they wus goin' ter stand there an' see 'ee drowned, fur none o' us wud go thru that 'ere water fur a gowd watch es big es a fry-pan."

Making for the bridge, I found the water was only about three feet deep, but it was bitterly cold, and rushing over the bridge like a mill-race. Feeling for the bottom rail with my foot, I grasped the top rail and worked my way gingerly across—the four croakers on the meadow bank roaring at me, as I slowly proceeded, that they "wus goin' ter stand there an' see me drowned, they wus."

When I was safely over and on dry ground, I told them to come over, assuring them there was no

danger about it, and adding that they were losing time, and money too, where they were. However, they not only took my suggestions in ill part, but passed observations on myself and my doings in anything but polite terms. As a parting salute, the spokesman of that obstinate four roared out,—“Yer doan’t belong ter these ’ere parts: ye’re a fule, a reg’lar downright fule, an’ ye’ll be drowned now, afore night,—see if ’ee ain’t!”

This volume of water flooding the river Mole makes the banks in parts, where it has hollowed them out underneath, most dangerous for a stranger to stand on. In many spots there is only a thin crust of earth held together by roots, and the water below is very deep and treacherous. My track often lay by some of these pools, deep and sullen ones. In one spot I usually expected to find two originals—extremely odd characters, and born anglers. No matter what the season, summer or winter, they would go a-fishing; and they caught fish too, go when they would. One peculiarity about the pair was, that they were never caught with their lines where other folks were in the habit of going. If there was one spot more lonesome or weird-looking

than another, there you might be sure to find them. They knew well, perhaps, that where fish, fowl, or fur have favourable localities, good food, and undisturbed possession, they grow larger than elsewhere, and so they often visited that particular spot by which my path frequently ran.

A mighty pike had his home there, a fact they were also well acquainted with. Deep pools, fringed on their edges with rushes and water-lilies were there; and runs of shallower water that ran with a sharper current from one pool into the other. Roach and chub of large size were to be seen swimming from pool to pool through these runs. Frequently there would be a swirl in the deep water, and the roach would leap clean out of it pursued by the pike; and the chub would fly like dark shadows under the great roots that ran in there.

One day—it was a gloomy one with a stiff breeze ruffling the surface of the water—a youth I knew had, by some unusual persuasive power, obtained leave to accompany this couple. His father, by the way, kept a public-house, and sold good liquor, which might have had something to do with it. Well, this young angler hooked a good chub in one



of the deep pools—a very fine fish: it was quite as much as he could do to play it, though he was no novice at fishing. Just as he had tired him out, and got him to the edge of the reeds, a monstrous pair of jaws showed above the water. There was a vicious snap, and a plunge—poor chubby was gone. So frightened was the lad that he left the spot, and never would he be persuaded to stand by the edge of that pool again. Nothing could divest his mind of the idea that he had seen an escaped alligator. That fish was never caught by line or net; he was shot as he lay sleeping near the flags, and he fully justified the young angler's opinion of him, for he was a most ferocious-looking monster.

## *II.—Over the Kissing Stile.*

One weird and lonely spot I often visited at night, listening to the sounds made by the wild creatures, and watching their movements.

As the mist rose and fell again, according to the temperature, strange forms floated over the surface of the water and round about the trees. The cries of birds and animals are different by night from

what they are by day, and they come on the ear with startling distinctness. The moor-hen as it flies overhead gives out a call like the clicketing "kevit-kevit" of the barn owl, which also comes flitting now here, now there, on noiseless wings, uttering his harsh hissing scream. As you stand close to the river-tangle you hear the sough of wings overhead; and then a dusky form, looking like some shadow, drops close to you. It is the heron: he is near you, but his form is not visible. Night-jars hum in the trees, and the whirring noise made as they pursue their prey sounds in strange vibrations over woods and meadows. The cows can be heard as they nip the grass in feeding, a long distance off. In the reeds and tangle the sedge-warblers keep up a continual chatter all through the night.

Large fish feed by night more than by day; you may hear a splash and rush on the shallows, and see the glint of scales as the fish dart in all directions from one of their enemies—pike, perch, or eel. Perhaps you may see something which in passing leaves a wake behind it: you look for the lightest part of the narrow run that leads to the nearest pool, and see a dark knob-like object moving swiftly out of

sight. It is the head of an otter passing up-stream. Only the head is visible, but there is no mistaking him, for the next moment his strange whistling cry is heard.

In the air overhead is the sound of quickly moving wings passing and repassing, and strange notes fall on the ear,—the cries of birds that are coming to those that have gone over before them. I have often listened to this: there seems at times to be great indecision amongst birds that travel by night. One part of the company—the leading one—will waver in flight, and pass to and fro several times, sounding their call-notes, then go off in a direct course in perfect stillness. After a minute or so you will hear others with the same call-notes, moving hither and thither in all directions for some time before they go off for good. They are probably uncertain and baffled now and then in their course; or the hindmost company may be young birds making the migrating passage for the first time.

I have spent many an hour about that lonely spot, listening to the voices of the night, and learning some of its secrets; but I confess to feeling some relief when I was on my way home again. It is very, very

quiet at midnight in such places, even though there be moonlight. The shadows move; so do many other things, although nature is supposed to be sleeping. The water agitates the flags and the river-tangle; from time to time something moves the tree-tops on the stillest night, ever so gently, like a faint sigh. Then again all is silent. Even the run of the water changes in its sound as it flows over the shallower places: sometimes you hear the ripple, ripple, plainly; at others you hardly catch a sound at all. Soon again it comes—ripple, ripple, ripple.

And now we pass through a little copse, and come to a good old-fashioned stile: the top rail, which runs well into the bank on each side, is merely a large oak limb, worn to a polish by the friction of leathern gaiters—generations of gaiters.

The original use for these massive structures was to keep the cattle from breaking bounds, and getting in the woods. The banks were level with the top rail, and strongly splashed down with the live boughs of hazels and other growth. Many remain now, but as they decay the present proprietors replace them with iron gates. The cattle in the meadows that



these stiles closed in were rather wild: more than once we have been glad to get on the right side of one.

The country folks mark time and events by some of these massive structures. You will often hear them say, "I minds the time that 'ere stile was fust fixed, I do. It be over an' above sixty years; I be now gettin' well on fur eighty, I be, an' 'twas my fayther as put un up there. I was a young un then, an' helped fayther. None on us bided in shool in they times, looterin' about nigh on to men's time, same as they do now. They had ter turn out an' do summut o' some sort or other. 'Twud a bin uncommon rough if they hadn't, I can tell 'ee. It's my 'pinion they larns 'em enough ter make 'em werry on-satisfied, fur they wunt work farmin' no longer than they're 'bliged to. 'Recktly they gits any size like, off they goes ter better theirselves."

The name "kissing stile" is bestowed on these rustic structures. Willum, Garge, or Eddard, when out "coortin'," claims a kiss from his lady-love as he assists her, with rustic gallantry, to get over one of these formidable barriers. There is apt to be a little coquetting on the lady's part, or perhaps only a gentle

remonstrance. Jane will tell Willum that "he be gettin' most owdacious bold, thet he be; and thet ef she'd know'd he'd bin comin' thet way, she wud a bided indoors." But Willum, by some wonderful powers of speech, gets Jane to look at the matter in quite a different light, and she becomes more quiet than would have seemed natural to so active a damsel. Listening to some bird, or watching some wild animal, one is often compelled to be an involuntary eavesdropper. "Now, then, over ye comes," says Willum; "gently now, doan't be flustered,—that's the way. Now jump, an' I'll ketch ye." And then follows a sound like the breaking of a great stick,—oh, such a smack!—Willum claiming and taking his rustic dues. Ay, they are rightly named kissing stiles.

Getting over this stile, not like Willum, alas! but alone, I find myself in the meadows, where my two fishermen are likely to be. The meadows form a gentle slope down to the river; here again is some new freak of the Mole. The soil is a kind of sandy loam; little by little the floods have undermined the banks, causing great landslips. Large portions of the meadow have gone into the river, taking the trees

with them. The trees have been got out and cut up, but the holes made by their fall have, through successive floods, widened into bays ; whilst the vegetation, ever ready to annex fresh soil, flourishes luxuriantly. The roots bind the light soil firmly on to the banks that had fallen to the water.

From the meadow you walk down to the river through a thicket of rush, flag, water-docks, and stunted willow. The bottom is sandy here. Where the water has been turned from its course by the landslips, it has cut narrow channels, through which it runs with considerable force into the large pools, bringing a continual supply of fresh food for the fish. A fine spot is this for perch : they are good ones when you can manage to catch them, but from the bountiful supply of food that comes to their haunts, they are very capricious at times in taking the bait, let it be as choice as it may. Pike are also found here, but of no great size, from two to three pounds weight mostly. He prefers to make his home in those parts of the water where the lilies and the reeds grow thickly.

The sun is low down, and over the river and meadows the swallows are wheeling, for insect life is in full

play, especially those river-side torments, the midges ; their bite is irritating enough to cause one to shun their vicinity.

Rooks and jackdaws are passing overhead on their way to the noble Gatton beech-woods ; besides these we hear and see flocks of peewits, that nest all round this part of the Mole. Food is abundant on these long and wide meadows ; coarse tufts of rush and other low tangle furnish plenty of cover for their slight nest-making efforts. They are not shy, no one molests them. Plover-netting has not come into practice here yet. Fifty or more could be caught at one pull of the net, if the country people knew how to do it. Some of us could put them up to it, but we do not intend to. The plover is too good a friend to the farmer for us to injure him, and he is also one of the ornaments of the low meadows and ploughed lands. This lot before us have young with them ; it is easy to pick them out by their flight. A young rook and a young peewit waver as they fly ; you will frequently see both rooks and peewits feeding close together.

Passing a bend of the river, we are arrested by the sound of a chirp like that of the blackbird. Looking round, we catch sight of a slouch hat, which we know



belongs to "Soldier Will," as he was always called. Like myself, he had a taste for wild life : his proclivities took him into many a secluded spot, and in such we often came across one another.

Picture to yourself a tall spare figure, over six feet high, with a nose that was markedly hooked. A pair of keen grey eyes peered out from under bushy eyebrows ; his face, in spite of nose and eyebrows, was a decidedly laughing one : the expression of his mouth was continually contradicting that of his upper features. He wore a long grey coat which reached well below his knees,—summer and winter the same long coat : the only difference he ever made in his toilet was that in winter he was closely buttoned up to his chin, whereas in summer that grey garment was allowed to fly open. His slouched felt hat was also grey, the brim of it always pulled well over the eyes. Having been wounded in action, he had a limping gait ; and he never was seen out of doors without his fishing-rod and his stout ash stick. He had always fished, he would tell me, both at home and abroad, whenever he could get the chance ; and fish he still would, so long as he could get about at all. Where was the harm of fair fishing with rod and line ? he

would ask defiantly. After a time a sort of comradeship was established between us ; and we would inform each other in what direction along the river we were likely to wander, although of course words when fishing were few and far between. " Quiet and out of sight," he would say ; " if you can see a fish, the fish can see you."

Very quietly I made my way down to him, and to my whispered question " What luck ? " he pointed to a good heap, a little on one side of him, covered over with flags. " Perch," said he ; " I have not shifted from here all day, but I am going now. I shall pack up, and neatly too. I can't bear to see beautiful fish tumbled about anyhow." He was quite right : a catch of fish shows to better advantage placed neatly, carefully spread on rushes or flags ; and they eat better too, when they come to table, from not having been bruised or tumbled about.

" Full or empty ? " he asked, pointing to my basket.

Slinging it round, I opened the lid for his inspection. First he lifted the plump gudgeons lovingly up with his finger and thumb, then the perch, and lastly the trout. After inspecting them, he carefully replaced them in their green coverings of flags,

saying, "You've been in luck's way to-day ; they're a pretty lot—beauties all of them."

Then we made our way home together. A most amusing companion he always was, having a fund of anecdotes ; and so well told were they, that long miles always seemed short in his company. Well up in the nature and ways of fish was Soldier Will, and indeed in any other subject he cared to talk about.

"And where is your inseparable Dickey to-day?" I asked ; and was told in reply that Dickey was working the bream in the reaches below here.

The Mole widens out broad : a scent of tobacco comes to us—a powerful scent—from a short black cutty, well coloured. Soldier Will observes that he can nose Dickey half a mile down-stream when the wind is right ; also that the midges don't bite him same as they do other folk : that pipe of his settles them, so as they can't get near him.

Under a large oak we find Dickey all ready for going home. A greater contrast could not be found than that presented by this odd pair. Will, as I said, was tall ; Dickey only a little over five feet in height—thin as a lath, with light scrubby hair and a bristly moustache ; beard he had none. When he

was excited—and he was that pretty often—his stubbly moustache bristled up fiercely. One eye squinted strongly ; and if you happened to see Dickey with a big fish in his hand you would not forget it—that squint, I mean.

A comical figure altogether was Dickey. He wore a long, brown, weather-stained coat, faded so much that in colour it resembled the plumage of the brown owl : when out fishing and near any tree-trunk, it was a very difficult matter to distinguish Dickey.

“Come on, Dickey,” said Soldier Will ; whereupon Dickey put up his fish in his flag-basket without a word, and walked along beside us. Presently he observed, “Got some big uns ; some on ’em like a pair of bellows.”

“And who is going to eat ’em, now you’ve caught ’em, Dickey ?”

“Somebody’ll eat ’em, but not me, Soldier,” he answered, looking up with a grin. Bream are not very desirable fish for the table.

All the farmers along the river-sides gave this pair leave to fish, with one exception. This was Old Crab-apple, as we called him. He never fished himself, however, so they fished without his leave, and were



caught by him and abused roundly. They tried to tempt him by the offer of a catch now and again.

"I wants neither your fish nor you ; mind ye, I warns ye off."

Two days later he caught them there again. First he gave it to Soldier Will hotly ; then he walked on to give Dickey a turn. Dickey had slunk in under a bank, but did not escape him ; so he put on his comical air, stuck his old straw hat on the back of his head, turned the collar of his coat up over his ears, and, as the farmer stood over him, looked up with a squint. Crab-apple looked at him without a word, and passed on up the field.

Then Dickey got up and joined his friend. "Did he say much, Soldier?" he asked.

"You heard what he said plain enough," grunted Will.

"Ah! he said nothin' to me."

Looking at Dickey for a moment, criticisingly, Will said—"And no wonder he made a mistake, an' took ye for one of the biggest fools he ever seed in his life ; but ye're not that, Dickey,—rather the other way, eh, old boy?"

One more visit they made on Old Crab-apple's

grounds, but it was their last. Some splendid bulrushes grew in this part of the river-side, and Soldier Will had promised to secure some of these for a friend who wanted them for purposes of ornament or decoration. The cantankerous old farmer got wind of the pair, and having told his people not to go into the meadows, he turned his bull loose there. The two friends had done some fishing, and with their baskets and a bundle of bulrushes on Soldier Will's back, they came from the shelter of the banks up into the open meadows, congratulating each other on the way they had "done" Old Crab-apple. All at once a sound like distant thunder fell on their ears.

"Dickey, my boy," said Will, "we've left off fishing none too soon; there's thunder about."

"That's no thunder," answered Dickey; and looking round he saw the bull charging across the meadows in their direction. "Look! it's the bull!" yelled he. One glance,—off went the bundle of bulrushes. "The river!" shrieked Dickey—"the river, Soldier!"

Down the bank they rushed; through the tangle and into the water, where they floundered through, shoulder-deep, fish and all, and up the opposite bank: there they sat down, gasping.

That bundle of rushes had done them good service : the bull had busied himself with them a while, goring and tossing them about, else the result might have been serious for both.

"How do you feel, Dickey?" asks Will.

"Queer, Soldier, queer; and how are you?"

"Wild as a hawk, Dickey, wild. We've had notice to quit served us with a vengeance this time. We won't go there any more."

### *III.—The Burrowing Mole.*

The fords and the way-poles are numerous along the run of the Mole. When I first knew the river, bridges, which now are numerous, were not in existence, and serious inconvenience was felt in times of flood. Modern improvements have remedied this to a very great extent. Gentlemen through whose estates the river winds have had the fallen trees cleared out of the river's bed, and narrow channels widened, so that the water has more chance of getting away; but even now many places are impassable in flood-time. Those who are in the secret get their fishing-tackle ready when the river is brim-full up to the

bank-tops, and the brooks are bayed back by the body of water from the river. When the rain has ceased, and the rush from the hills and fields has stopped, there is calm deep water, which soon clears down. From the river the fish rush for shelter and food—there is plenty of that. Pike, perch, trout, chub, roach, and dace,—all rush up.

I have seen good pike taken with a worm, for the fish sometimes will bite at anything. Baskets are filled then, and the fish run large. The country folks have names of their own for the fords ; for instance, Flanchford, near Reigate and Leigh, is called Flinchet. If you asked one of the rustics to direct you to Flanchford Bridge, he would tell you “ he’d got no recknin’ of a place o’ that name.” Ask him for Flinchet, and he would give you accurate directions at once. Those who come down from town to see wild life in some of our localities often go back sadly disappointed, simply because they cannot understand the dialect of the natives of the soil.

Past the lawns of mansions the river flows through park-like stretches of meadow-land, heavily timbered with fine trees, and dotted over with groups of cattle, some of them standing knee-deep in the shallower



parts, lazily brushing the flies off with their long tails as they stand feeding on the tops of the lush river-grass.

There are quiet and beautiful nooks beside the woodland Mole. Here and there are the ruins of some old mill which once was busy and full ; and you can trace through the meadows the spot where a mill-pond had its source. The meadow lies even now two, and in some places four feet, below the banks of what was once the pond. Even the walls of the sluice-gates remain, covered over with ferns and mosses of varied tints. One of these it was which suggested Eliza Cook's poem, "The Old Water-Mill," beginning, "And is this the old mill stream?" Although modern improvements have destroyed much of the picturesqueness of rural life, there is still plenty of it left, if one only knows where to look for it. This was a favourite haunt, during her childhood, of the poetess who has so lately gone to her rest. She loved this old mill, and wrote of it more than once. In "The Old Mill Stream" she says—

"I wonder if still the young anglers begin,  
As I did, with willow-wand, pack-thread, and pin ;

When I threw in my line with expectancy high  
As to perch in my basket, and eels in a pie.

The first of my doggerel breathings was there—  
'Twas the hope of a poet, 'An Ode to Despair.'

Beautiful streamlet, I dream of thee still,  
Of thy pouring cascade and thy tic-tac-ing mill ;  
Thou livest in mem'ry, and wilt not depart,  
For thy waters seem blent with the stream of my heart."

And in "The Old Water-Mill" she laments—

"The mill is in ruins. No welcoming sound  
In the mastiff's gruff bark and the wheels dashing round ;  
The house, too, untenanted—left to decay—  
And the miller, long dead : all I loved passed away."

More Place, Betchworth, is quaint and beautiful in itself, as well as in all its surroundings. The river flows calmly by Betchworth House to the weir, and from the weir to Brockham, or, as it was named in olden times, Brocksholm—the haunt of the badger. There is a real old English green there, surrounded by pleasant rustic cottages and pretty houses, with the village church.

The Mole and its banks have great interest for the naturalist ; animal and bird life thrive vigorously

there. For the artist who knows the paths that run to and beside it, the river is an endless source of inspiration; but many of its treasures are hidden from the stranger. And where—as is the case in many parts of it—the beautiful spots lie so closely together, the painter is bewildered amongst them, and his day is nearly gone before he can make up his mind which he shall fix on his canvas.

After Boxhill Bridge, near Dorking, is passed, the character of the river changes, and it begins to do a little burrowing as it runs in a line with Betchworth Park, part of the Deep Dene estate, its old ruined castle and fine avenue of lime-trees, where the rooks have their home. The great chestnut-trees, now in all stages of decay, were, when I knew them best, and probably still are, tenanted by brown owls, barn owls, jackdaws, and starlings, as well as bats. The park is rich in bird-life of many species.

A short distance from the castle mill, the river winds along at the foot of Boxhill, where it is pent up; you can see where it has torn a passage through the chalk.

The banks are full of beauty for a mile or more, but, as they run through private property, the general

public can know little about them. In times past this used to be one of my favourite hunting-grounds ; I had permission to wander about there as I chose. Day after day, and night after night, I used to explore along the banks. At some of the bends the river runs swiftly over the shallows into a broad pool ; then again there is a shallow where masses of weeds, showing emerald-green, wave to and fro in the water. One or two good trout can be got at such places at times, and fine silver-bellied eels. One of the swallows of the river is close to a stretch of this sort. It is merely a pit, the sides of it covered with rank river-growth. The inlet, at the time I knew it, was about three feet wide, and two inches in depth. The pit was some ten or twelve feet deep, and it held many tons of water ; more than once I have emptied this swallow by simply keeping the water back with a turf dam.

All that could be seen was a deep pit, covered above water-mark with herbage ; and two holes not quite large enough to get your hand into, which went down somewhere or other. I noticed the fish never entered that place.

One wild spot in the side of the hill, close to the



river, is called the Pigeon-holes, on account of the great number of birds that shelter there. Large beech-trees, many of them decayed or decaying, stand out, bleached and bare, like skeleton trees. Some of them had been undermined long ago, and fallen into the river, which runs shallow here—tearing down great masses of chalk soil, that made small islands in the bed of the river ; whilst the trees formed bridges across from bank to bank. Their branches and roots, tangled in all directions, gave the river-plants a resting-place for their roots in the earth that they brought with them in their fall, and a rare shelter was there for the wild creatures. The moor-hen slipped along, in and out ; water-rats nibbled away at the sedges ; water-lilies opened their fair blossoms to the sun's gaze, all undisturbed. And here you could listen to the yike, yike, yike of the green wood-pecker, and watch him at his work ; or to the cooing of the pigeons, and the chatter of the sedge-warblers, which knew well that the step of rude man, or the hand of depredating boy, seldom marred the joy of existence in this secluded spot.

As to fish, the bed of the river actually seemed to move with them, as they swam up and down in the

clear running water. Sometimes a heron would rise from the flags, where he had been dozing, and flap away down-stream to some other lonely nook ; or a sparrow-hawk might dash out from the trees, and make away with an unlucky bird. But for these occasional visitants, it was, and still is, a quiet dreamy spot, where nothing is heard beyond the sounds made by wild creatures, and the endless ripple of the water.

But though fish were plentiful, I fished but little here ; there was always too much to see round about the Pigeon-holes. Only on a summer's night a friend and I sometimes did a little angling in good earnest. Good fish feed at night, pike especially ; the loaches, minnows, and others, come on the warm shallows for insects. Under the overhanging boughs of the alders they are on the watch for prey. One evening my companion killed two pike, each five pounds weight, in ten minutes ; that is, he landed them, in first-class style, without a net to bring them to grass. " When you have hooked a fish, get him landed quick," he would observe, quietly. And quickly his *were* landed, as a rule.

The mist comes off the water,—rises—falls again

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—creeps over the meadows—passes away—and returns again as the currents of warm air pass to and fro. The barn owl beats over the meadows, rises, falls, and screeches as he drops on his prey. Only those who are well acquainted with the vast number of the large-headed, short-tailed field-mouse, or, properly speaking, the field-vole, that large kind that inhabits the moist meadows, can fully appreciate the good done by the owls in the gardens of residents by the river-side. The field-voles become a perfect pest: being vegetable feeders, they eat the peas, bark the wall-fruit stems, gnaw the ground crops, and play general havoc, to say nothing of what other vermin of their sort will do; and yet owls are shot—oh, the pity and stupidity of it! I have a weakness for owls, having tamed and studied numbers of them for years. Wonderful birds they are, when you come to know them well; and so little understood that poets still write about “the moping owl,” “that ill-omened bird of night,” &c.; and even Shakespeare says, “Out on you, owls; nothing but songs of death:” not to speak of the ignorance of their nature and habits shown by keepers and farmers who ought to know and to protect them, in their own interests

Owls are in reality gay-hearted creatures, as full of fun and frolic as monkeys, and quite as inquisitive. Better behaved, however, they are, as becomes birds of their deportment.

The bright harvest moon floods the sides of Box-hill—commonly called the Whites—with a soft radiance; for she has been up for some hours and has come round the hill; her light falls full on the chalk sides, and the great trees near the river. A strip of meadow runs from the belt of trees to the water; shadowy forms flit hither and thither over the grass,—rabbits on the feed. From the bank where we are standing, a dead beech leans over: in its shadow we wait, close to the trunk, well hidden from view. We are in search of a natural history specimen. No sound is to be heard but the ripple of the water over the broad shallow which reflects the light of the moon. The dead limbs of the tree project over the water. From the trees comes a sound like the whine of young pups, answered by two sharp barking keuvits, and one prolonged hooe, hooe—hooe-e-hooe—a sound familiar to our ears. From two young brown owls the whining cries proceed; the other cry is from one or both of their



parents. Again the cries are heard ; three noiseless forms pass overhead and settle on the white limbs of the old beech ; one large bird and two young ones are there. Passing close to the trunk, we peer up at them very cautiously. The two young birds are on one limb, where they chatter together in owl fashion ; the old owl perches on a limb directly over the shallowest part of the river. Fish are working about—roach probably, for their sides flash silver, as they scuttle over the pebbles of the ford. I chance to tread on a little twig—it snaps ; there is only the slightest sound, but they hear it. Instantly their heads and bodies are erect like those of soldiers, looking half their usual size, for when alarmed their feathers are drawn close to the body. Finding that nothing ensues after the snapping of the twig, they settle down as before, the young ones softly whining to each other. The old bird now begins to sway to and fro, the head moving round first one way and then another. There is a flash of fish on the pebbles ; down drops the owl and fixes one. The water flies in showers of sparkling drops as the fish make for deeper water, whilst the one captured kicks vigorously. No chance of escape : the owl grasps the

fish with one foot and hops with the other ; then up he goes to the young ones. The prize is a good-sized fish, apparently a half-pounder. A great commotion follows ; there is much flapping of wings and whining on the part of the young owls, as they all shoot off to their dining-room at the foot of the Whites.

Owls when wet are in a sorry plight, but that is when wet with the rain. All birds and animals have a dislike to that, as a rule, and they will fly or run for shelter. Rain under certain atmospheric influences is very penetrating and depressing to all creatures. But into running water the brown owl will dash like any osprey, in order to capture his prey. I have seen him take the water repeatedly. The barn owl, too, will catch fish.

It is a common mistake to think that when the owl is seen sitting on a branch in the warm sunlight, he has lost his way and is bewildered. He likes dearly to sit and doze in the sun, and will do it for hours if he is not disturbed. Warmth he always seeks. The spot in which he makes his home must be dry and pretty free from draughts. When frightened by men or boys, whilst taking his warm nap in

the sun, he only does what some members of the human family do under similar circumstances—namely, loses his wits and comes to grief. When the birds gather round him and mob him, if one has discovered him napping, he is not much put out. A clutch from the very powerful foot of the brown owl puts one of the noisy crew into quietness. He can see well enough in broad daylight.

Close to the hill is Burford Bridge; from that the river runs to Mickleham and Norbury. Between Burford and Mickleham is Pray Bridge: a very ancient wooden structure once spanned the river here.

Through Norbury Park the river for some distance takes the form of successive pools, for the Mole burrows here. In a dry season it is very noticeable. This is a favourite locality for painters, and very beautiful. Not far from here is the Druids' Grove; some very old yew-trees are there.

Returning one day from a fishing excursion near Norbury, I passed the way-pole at the ford close to the Pilgrims' Way. The day had been warm, but a breeze had sprung up. Knowing that sometimes a good trout had his home in the pool, I thought

there would be no harm in trying for him below the ford ; so away I turned down the lane leading to it from the main road. There stood a man well known to myself, looking intently at the water. He nodded, and pointing to the pool, jerked out, "Otter !"

Drawing back from the water's edge, he tells me that one otter, if not more, has been working the river. A keen shot he is, and well versed in all the dodges of woodcraft ; besides which, he has leave from the owner of the estate to shoot the otter, if he can.

"It will be a waiting job ; will you come ? I am going home for my gun : about ten o'clock the moon will be round the hill, and I shall perch up for him."

Between ten and eleven we were there : it was a waiting job, no mistake about that, and the midges were ferocious. We kept, of course, perfectly quiet, and about midnight a splash was heard in the pool below, as if some dog had jumped into the water.

"Hark !" whispered my companion ; "they are at play, and will pass the ford directly."

That splash answers two purposes ; there is fun and profit as well in it, as far as the otters are con-



cerned. The fish in the pool rush to the sides of the banks ; so do the otters. Frightened fish lie closely together ; the otter knows this, and catches them easily. A rush on the shallow, and up goes the double barrel ; but it is not one of the otters that shows — only a large eel weighing certainly five pounds : his silver belly flashes like a streak of light as he makes for the next pool higher up.

He does not mean to let the otters make his acquaintance, if he can help it : they are, like the lady in the Ingoldsby legend, remarkably fond of eels. As we still stand perfectly quiet a hedgehog comes to the toe of my shoe, places his fore-feet on it, sniffs, murmurs a little, and passes on. Rabbits dot to and fro, and one hare rushes over the meadows. Master Reynard is not far away, for here he has his stronghold during the season. You may hear the yapping bark of the dog fox and the scream of the vixen, at intervals, all through the night. The badger once had his home on the hillside, but the poor fellow has been rooted out.

Once more the light has shifted. "I can't see rightly here," whispers my friend. "I will get into the water in the shade ; it is quite warm. If they

think of coming up at all, they will be in the light on the shallow. Hand me over my gun when I am in the water, and then get back from the bank a bit."

I did as he bade me, but in a few moments he was back at my side, dripping wet.

"What's the matter?" I asked in a whisper.

"Why, before I could settle myself, one of the otters passed between me and the bank, not a foot from my leg. What a go! He had been working the bank for that big eel, I fancy. I think it was the dog: he looked big as he passed me, and he gave me no time to fire at him. The other one is below somewhere; we may get her."

Once more we wait and watch. There is a whistle of pinions; it comes from two ducks that are going to feed on the shallows. The temptation is great, but my companion does not fire; he will wait for the other chance at the otter.

Presently there is a swirl of wings and a heron settles, almost opposite to our place of concealment: his white under-parts showing in the light is all that we can see, and that only for a few moments, but quite long enough for us to shoot him; still we

will not fire. In another moment he is invisible, although only twelve yards distant from us, at the most.

“Hark!” murmurs my friend. “Hear that! one of them is calling. There are cubs about somewhere. I fancy the other got the taint of me when I stood in the water, and slipped round on the meadow side; but we shall soon know.”

Once more the whistling call is heard. The light is now up-stream, something is coming down that streak of light at a rapid pace. The water flies in jets of silver light as it rushes over the shallow parts.”

“All right,” says my friend; “now I shall have him on this shallow.”

The gun is at his shoulder: as the dark spot passes he fires almost before the otter has left the deeper water. A long body rolls and twists in the water, the report of the second barrel rings out, and all is still.

Wading into the water, the man drags the poor dead beast by the tail on to the bank. Looking at him then in the moonlight, he finds, to his great disappointment, that it is a half-grown cub, which had heard its mother call and come to meet her.

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As I said before, with new owners, new regulations have been made, and many parts of our beautiful woodland Mole are closed. It cannot be helped ; but as a field naturalist I can say, with perfect reason, that with all their wise regulations there is not one half of the fish in this river that there used to be when it was open to any to fish there ; nor yet one quarter of the animal life that there formerly was along the river-banks.

Some folks, and a great many wild creatures, are best left alone. When man makes his arrangements with a view to alter the course of nature, as the darkey once observed, "something goes wrong with the works."



## CHAPTER V.

## WAYS AND WHIMS OF FRESH-WATER FISHES.

SOME authorities on matters pertaining to angling would have us believe that the fish are more wide-awake than they used to be, and that tackle on finer and more scientific principles, with far more elaborate baiting, is now required. This is certainly made to perfection ; and yet there is something far more necessary to success than all this, and that is a knowledge of the haunts and the habits of the fish angled for. As a rule, fish are very much like "humans" in having varying ways of living and of behaving themselves in different localities. What will serve the angler in one county, or even in one part of the same county, will be quite useless in another.

This is why the rustic angler, an agricultural labourer perhaps, will, with his primitive fishing-gear, get a good basket of fish, to the great astonishment of those less fortunate fishers who may be using the latest of modern appliances. The rustic knows the run and the lie of the water, accurately to a yard. From his childhood he has been familiar with it; he knows, too, the favourite foods of the fish as the seasons vary. He is well aware, also, how necessary it is to hide himself by all possible means from the sight of the fish: as he says, "They eyes is mortal quick; they sees you lots o' times afore you gets a glint on 'em." His knowledge of woodcraft gives him the knack of moving quietly; and what a valuable habit or gift that of quiet action is, either in gentle or simple folks! The latter may not practise it at all times, but they can when it is necessary. To see a great fellow come through the tangle and lay himself down by the brook for a side-cast up-stream, without so much as startling the moor-hen that is feeding near at hand, is an interesting and common enough sight with us.

If pike have come out of good waters they are

a fine enough fish for the table, but as a game sporting fish the pike is all that can be desired. When he has smashed up everything, and left me considering the vexatious incidents that are apt to attend his capture, I have found him more than I could desire. Now and again great brutes, about which the rustics have legends, rush from their haunts in the roots of flag, reed, and tangle, and seize a jack of three or four pounds by the middle—one that the angler was in the act of landing—close to the bank. Then, for a brief space, may be seen a tearing struggle; smash go the first and second joints of your rod and a part of your line, with the hooked jack,—and all is over. I have known some younger members of the rustic angling community to be so unnerved by mishaps of the kind that nothing could induce them to fish again in or near the water where this had occurred. They sum the creatures up as “dangerous to get near with either hand or foot.” For my part I prefer the middle-sized fish for sport and for the table.

One of the pike's favourite haunts I know well. Changes have taken place since I first remember it, but it is not greatly altered. The old mill, as grey

and as dusty as of old, stands yet surrounded by woods. There is the road winding between heath and bracken towards the upland moors; and there, too, is the other road, lined on either side with forest-timber, which leads to a secluded hamlet. The large rush-and-alder-fringed mill-pool is as it was, but the causeway — “cawsey” the rustics call it — with its sloping weir-boards — “splash-boards” — exists no longer. On each side of this stone-covered cart-road, which was protected by posts and rails, the pool extended, and a plank foot-bridge running directly over the sloping splash-boards was used by the customers who came from the hamlet to the mill. As a general rule the water on the causeway was about six inches deep, but sometimes it was more. The miller’s horses and cattle were constantly passing to and fro over it during the day.

On this waterway in the daytime the small fish delighted to congregate, for food and warmth were there; but in the gudgeon season these little beauties would come in shoals just at the dusk of the evening from a small stream that ran in near by, and they fed on the stones of the causeway, which had been warmed by the sun. Aquatic insect-life was there



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in great abundance. As the small stream ran round a little bend direct on to the cart-track, the gudgeon had no occasion to swim in the mill-pool; it would have been fatal for them to venture there. The pike knew, however, when the toothsome, luscious little fishes were feeding on the stones, and they would gather on both sides of the causeway for the purpose of better acquaintance, if possible. When the head of water in that particular season was high enough in the pond to cause a run over the splash-boards into the pool, certain friends of mine, who, as they put it, "knowed what they was arter," would gather on the foot-plank bridge, with the full consent of the miller, who was wroth about a lot of his young ducks that had lost the number of their mess through those voracious pike. The lads had noticed that when the gudgeon shoaled on the stones the pike were on the watch. Now and again a small pike would sail on the causeway, poise himself for a moment, and then make a rush for them, causing a dire commotion. Some threw themselves clean out of the water, others made for the pond never to return again. You could see fierce rushes and swirls where the pike were quite ready for them. Some,

in their fright, would venture too near the current that ran over the splash-boards, and, after vain efforts to recover themselves, would wriggle down, tail first, into the other side of the mill-pool, to be instantly snapped up by the pike there. Roach and small trout the monsters could have in abundance; that was their common food, easy enough to get whenever they required it; it would have been useless to try to capture them with either of these: but gudgeon were a luxury which they tried their hardest to procure when it was possible.

Now gudgeon are, at certain times—troubled by some law known to themselves—compelled, like eels, to make down-stream. Let any one curious in such matters, who knows their haunts, watch them gather for days—if there is any fall in the water—before they will finally allow themselves to be carried over, tail first, into the current below. They do not all go over at the same time—a few, the finest fish, slip over first, in small companies, as if to show the main body the best method of doing it. At such a time those observant rustic anglers would gather on that bridge. Their rods were of the most primitive description, simply a hazel stick

about 6 feet long, split into a fork at the top, and bound below the split with a wax end. A small twig lashed on to each end of the fork formed a run for the line, which consisted of thin water-cord, terminated by a gimp-hook. The other portion of the line that ran from the fork was coiled round the angler's hand—the one which held the rod. After the gudgeon had been hooked on just below the back fin—the bait-kettle of the whole party was a large flower-pot—it would be dropped on the top of the splash-boards. Down it wriggled in the run of the water into the pool below, where large mouths were ready for it. They did not use a float of any kind, considering it best for the bait to run free. Before many moments elapsed you would hear one or another of the company bidding his neighbour move a bit, to let him pass and land his fish. There was a good-tempered comradeship among those rustic anglers that is somewhat unusual, I fancy, among the so-called more polite classes. After a little the pike would leave off feeding in the sudden abrupt fashion which is their way.

This was the only method of capture pursued at the causeway of the old mill. Those pike had al-

ways been accustomed to watch for the gudgeon coming down to them from the boards above, and they would only take the bait in that fashion.

One evening I remember a visitor arrived with a trolling-rod of the latest manufacture, and he tried his luck there without success. The four friends alluded to were at their accustomed place ; and with more directness than nicety of expression, one of them asked when he intended "to leave off heavin' an' pitchin' about?—they'd come to catch fish, and if he wanted to act the fule, he'd better git lower down the pond."

Although the pike has been credited with indiscriminating voracity, he is, at certain times of the year, very "picksome," as our folks say, if not dainty. That is when the water-fowl—the swimmers and the waders—leave their homes to paddle and run amongst and over the weeds that cover and line the waters which the pike frequents. You can see his alligator-like head just clear of the masses of weed that surround the fish ; and you may try him with anything you like—roach, dace, gudgeon, or minnow—he will have none of them. He is intent on other game. You can hear the bird-life that is



all about more than you can see it — coots clank and click, moor-hens call, little grebes chatter, and the water-rail grunts and squeaks ; but you will see little of it, for in the breeding season they keep very close. One might be easily forgiven for taking the nest of coot or moor-hen for a mere heap of sedge-drift, or that of the little grebe for a lump of green stuff a trifle higher than the surrounding weeds,—so artless, apparently, and yet hidden with what seems such consummate art, are the nests, if the slight platform of damp weed-tangle can be called by that name. In the case of that of the little grebe or dabchick, it is absolutely wet from the time the eggs are first laid, up to the moment when the little creatures burst from their shells.

All these birds know well that the pike is on the watch for their broods at this season, and they use the greatest precautions. I have watched them exercise these repeatedly. In spite of all they can do, numbers of their progeny come to grief. Even the kingfisher becomes uneasy when the pike is on the watch ; and he will not rest, as is usually his wont, on any twig so low down as nearly to touch the water, when the great fish is on the alert for feathered prey.

There he lies ; he has not moved one inch from the spot where we first noted him ; but, as we look, there is a stir in the rushes, and now a moor-hen appears, followed by her dark-looking fluffy chicks. She is making her way to the bit of open water that is free from weeds. Out of one corner of that very spot the broad snout has been poked so long. She looks all round very cautiously, but neither sees nor hears anything to alarm her. Off the weeds she slips into the water, her chicks following closely, making a pretty sight as they cluster about their mother, like so many dark corks afloat.

The ugly snout has vanished ; but with a rush that causes the water to boil up and stirs the rushes all round, its owner makes for his prey, taking in three of the fluffy little creatures at one snap—for, as a rule, the pike seizes from below. The old bird herself has a narrow escape ; she barely misses being included in that vicious snap.

The water-rail is very wary of swimming over any water at this time, for his slim compressed body goes down the pike's gullet as easily as that of a dace or gudgeon.

Frogs, too, dread and avoid the water now. If you

catch one and throw him into it, his frantic efforts to gain the bank again are very curious. When his tribe visit the ponds and pools in spawning-time, the pike will have nothing to do with them. The rustics will tell you "he hates 'em like pisen then." Only when the frog has left the water and gone to live on the land, making himself plump and handsome, the pike becomes enamoured of him again; and at that season you will hear the rustic angler say, "I shell try summat else; I shell go an' kick up a chawly off the moor." When he has kicked him up, as he terms it, he proceeds with his frog as follows: Holding the "chawly" by the hind-legs, he takes him to the water. Any one that has held a frog in this fashion knows that in the creature's struggles to escape its body is held upright. Whilst the man has it so in his left hand, he brings the first joint of the second finger of his right hand down to the middle of the thumb, and, holding it at the back of froggy's head, lets drive, or, as he says, "snicks him," killing him at once. So effectual is this operation that I have never known a frog to move after it. From those horny fingers it acts with the force of a catapult. This is the first part of the proceeding. The next step is to fix a double hook

in the frog's back—in the skin. Tie his fore-feet in front of him with a bit of thread, and his hind-legs above the hook in the same way, and he is, as they say, ready for diving. The same rod or long stick is used that our rustic had on the foot-bridge over the splash-boards, only he goes to work now in a different manner. With his frog suspended head downwards, he cautiously walks along until he finds a hole clear of weeds in the middle, and close to the side. Into this he very gently drops his frog, and he pulls him up in the same manner. Presently away shoots the line, he gives the fish time to get the full flavour of that diving "chawly," and then he lets him have it. Says our rustic, "They sees lots on 'em go in head fust, an' swim right away; but they jacks don't often see 'em cum up agin, feet fust, arter their dive. They wonders what's up, an' they goes fur it."

I can vouch for the truth of this, for I have watched the proceeding. "They jacks is like my young uns in apple-time," continues the man; "they be free to blow their kites out in my orchard as much as iver they likes,—an' there's plenty there. But no, thet don't suit 'em; they must git in neighbour's orchard, just because they apples there be a leetle different.



That 'ere chawly was a leetle different, an' the jack snapped him."

Before dismissing our pike, I would just state that where they are kept in proper—that is, moderate—number, they are valuable enough, and, as a rule, large where the food is good. I have, however, known waters where, owing to some mistaken notion, it was not allowed to angle for them, and in such they dwindled down to little more than the size of a large herring; and so many of them were there, that not a sign of other fish was visible. Fish of prey they certainly are, and when they have to feed on one another the diet does not in any way suit them. When things get to that pass, the only thing to be done is to sweep the lot out, run the pool dry and clean it, and then after a time introduce fresh stock.

A great outcry has been made against pike getting into certain waters; yet I think they are beneficial in moderate numbers in preserved waters. They keep coarse fish, such as roach and others, in proper proportions. When a pond is overstocked with roach, dace, and tench, the angler will often get a day's annoyance instead of a day's fishing.

Where you find pike, you will generally come across

perch. It is not invariably the case, perhaps, but it is the exception otherwise. From some cause or other the perch has become scarce where he was at one time to be found in plenty; and I can only account for the fact in one way. The bottoms of streams, ponds, and rivers, are not so clean as they once were. It is now only in very remote districts, as a rule, that you find any one of the above waters without a deposit of mud, more or less odorous. The food-supply has altered; it is a long time now since I have seen a large gathering of that nimble little fellow, the fresh-water shrimp. At one time one might watch the sandy bottom boil up, all alive with countless myriads of them, where the water ran clear through the meadows; but this has not been so of late years. They were fine food for the perch. He could revel then in loaches, gudgeons, minnows, water-snails, and shrimps. Then he existed in numbers; and more than that, he reached a good size.

Only once of late years have I seen what could be called a good perch, perfect in shape, condition, and colour. That one weighed nearly two pounds. When found, I made a note of him by placing a canvas on my easel and painting him full size. One hears

anglers of limited experience, when looking at fish pictures—even by such a prince of fish-painters as Rolf—say they have never seen such pike, perch, trout, or grayling as those before them. I have not the least doubt of it, for it is only in the best waters, both as regards quality and quantity, with a first-rate food-supply, that fish arrive at perfection. From certain waters I have had pike and perch that looked nearly as thick as they were long, hog-backed, and with pouches like the throats of the jolly, well-fed monks of old. As to the trout, they were short, thick-set, crimson-speckled beauties.

It is not always, indeed one may say it is rarely possible to visit such waters. It needs much persuasive power on our part, and many manœuvres, to obtain permission even for a very limited time. So say my rustic friends, and I can endorse their experience. It is a matter of no small moment to get permission for even one half-day. And old mills and ancient flood-gates are disappearing fast, and some mill-streams are becoming choked up with mud and aquatic vegetation. Then there is the bother caused by new owners through whose grounds the water runs. These and other difficulties have caused

the millers to make use of steam-power. This is the reason why those old timbers, and the rough walls surrounding them, are no longer frequented by perch with erected back fins, examining the stones for loach and minnows. He was once, as we know, a bold biter ; but in some waters he has become very fastidious — so much so, that recently what was formerly a famous perch-hole in my younger days, was declared to be perchless ; and the assertion was believed, because no one had ever fished there with anything but live bait. A friend of my own, who is a firm believer in the efficacy of well-scoured dew-worms, having had good sport in various counties with them, tried them in this hole, and to the surprise of the owners of the property, he landed four fine perch, one after the other, in quick time.

For a glorious combination of colour, give me a fine perch in good condition from good water. Where a moderate rush of water runs from a sluice over the mill-apron among stones, winding hither and thither, and ultimately resting in a deep hole at the foot—that is the place where perch love to gather. I have known them congregate formerly in great numbers in such a spot, so that there was hardly comfortable



moving room—that is, where they kept to the hole itself. “Oh, they are only perch,” said my friend, once, as I stood watching them flash about. Just to give me some idea of their numbers, he got his large cast-net and threw it into the hole. The result was a fine haul of perch, nearly all one size—half-pounders. “What will you do with them?” I asked. “Why, turn them out in the water above the mill,” was his reply, “and let them grow larger;” and he proceeded at once to the business.

Things are changed now, indeed, and perch have become conspicuous through their entire absence. I should like to see them back again in their old haunts; for one’s earliest reminiscences are associated with them, and paddling as a boy in the mill-stream in the evening, after the water had been shut off, to get loaches for baits. What very strict injunctions our rural fishing instructors gave us not to get little ones, only big loaches, because “they’d ketch the biggest fish, fur the little uns couldn’t swaller ’em”! Well do I remember the first time they let me catch a big perch and get him out, “all by myself.” My rod was an osier wand, costing one penny at the basketmaker’s. I can feel now the funk I was in

after my fish was firmly hooked. Then they told me I had lost him in the weeds, just to tease me; and when I had got him out, I put him in the skirt of my old-fashioned gaberdine and bolted off—too happy to sleep for hours that night because I had caught and landed a good perch.

Concerning trout, I feel inclined to say but little, for the ablest pens have written so much about them that I am on ticklish ground. Of the different varieties of the common brook-trout I will not speak, because I have seen such differently shaped trout, and ones so variously coloured, taken from the same stream within one short half-mile of one another. I once saw six trout, all half-pounders, and some of them larger, captured one evening at the very height of the season under an old bridge. Not one brace was alike: each fish differed more or less from the other. These were the common trout of the brook; no cross had ever been introduced into that water to make hybrids of them. The man who caught them told me that, a mile and a half lower down, there was a greater difference still. I visited the latter spot, and found he was correct. Some were quite silvery, others were inclined to a golden-brown

tinge; the rest were toned in olive-green on the back.

Sometimes a large trout will make his home on some bit of water that is connected with the main stream, or in the stream itself. One weighing four or five pounds is not so very rare in certain districts. If a rustic discovers such a one in a stream, he keeps the knowledge of it to himself; if two know of it, they generally agree "to save him for somebody as wants him," and they share the proceeds. When once a large trout has made his hover in a stream, it takes a great deal to move him. He may be seen and fished for, too; but that is a long way off getting him.

One day a well-dressed man visited a certain hamlet, carrying the newest of fly-rods; he intended to fish for trout. Could any one give him information as to the best place for his day's sport? As he asked for it at the bar of the small inn of the hamlet, the information was soon forthcoming. One of the customers there told him he knew where there was a big one, and no mistake; he could show it to him, and then all he had to do was to catch it. The bait took. After a generous "liquor up" and the tip of a shilling, away they started. He saw the fish, and

for nearly the whole of a day he threshed that water hard enough to frighten all the trout that ever swam in it. But not even a fish the size of a sprat did he capture. At the inn, before his train started, as he rested for an hour, his guide of the morning appeared and asked him what sport he had had. "Not a single fish," replied he; adding, "I would spend half-a-sov. in drinks if that trout lay in my basket, or give the same sum to any one who would put me up to getting it there." Five minutes later the native whispered to him, "Did ye mean what ye said?" The angler pulled out half-a-sovereign and showed it to him. "Bide here a bit," said the man; "your train don't start yet." In less than half an hour the stranger was beckoned out of the bar to see the big trout, still alive and kicking vigorously, on some flags in a basket. He had a hook attached to a piece of broken gut in his upper lip; not a bruise or a mark was on him.

"Take him, basket an' all, fur what ye said," quoth the native; "he's a precious sight too big to go into that consarn o' yourn. And I be werry much obleedged to you for this 'ere half-sov'rin, and no mistake."



I was informed afterwards that the fish had been so frightened by the threshing of that would-be angler, that he had retreated to the utmost limit of his hover under the bank, and there he had remained, as only a trout will remain. The cute rustic knew this would be so, and he had simply gone down to the spot, taken off his shoes, and tucked up his trousers, and "groped him out." That is how most of the great trout are captured, but I never saw one that had been groped for that was not shown with a hook in his mouth. A gut hook does not cost much, and it looks so very much better. "Vile poaching?" No, that was waste land where the big trout was got out.

And after all, when a fish of that size is in a stream he becomes entirely carnivorous, and feeds on the smaller members of his own species, to say nothing of the way he gobbles up spawn when it is the season for the trout running up for the spawning. So the sooner the great fellow is out of a brook or pond the better. I have seen many large trout captured, beautiful fish. Some of them had made their homes in places where you would be more likely to look for water-voles than for trout. But, with very few

exceptions, they were frightened to their hovers, and then groped for.

Grand fish are caught by our Thames anglers, in a fair fight between man and fish ; and the skill and patience needed to capture a wary Thames trout can only be appreciated by those who have fished for them. That style of angling is unknown to the rustic, yet I have seen a farm-labourer catch a first-rate lot of fine trout with rods and lines that were not worth twopence.

The silvery quick dace is a great favourite with me, not only on account of his sporting and edible qualities, but for a still stronger reason. He brings back some of the happiest of my angling memories. I see again that bright stream that ran into our river. Huge burdocks, water-docks, and great masses of purple loosestrife, together with sedge and meadow-sweet, grew on the banks. Its sandy margin was the feeding and playing ground of the nimble sandpipers that ran about and flirted their bodies up and down, the whole day long. In that lush tangle I have seen rare specimens of moths and butterflies. The clear-winged hawk-moth was not rare in the perfect little jungle of aquatic growth.

How often he has hummed round my head, and then settled on a blade of sedge close to, looking more like king hornet than a moth! I admired him, but never attempted his capture. Insects, to my mind, are most beautiful, in fact only in their true beauty, when seen alive. I would that I might write a whole book concerning the natural life in and about that stream. As it is, I may only give a very slight idea of it.

As a food-stream for fish it was not to be surpassed. The general run of the bottom was sand and bright gravel, studded here and there with large stones. Bright-green weeds waved in long streamers to and fro in the current—so thickly in some parts that they only left a clear channel about a foot wide in the middle of the stream. Where a large stone was bedded, the weeds would wave round it on either side. Below it would be a hole about three feet in depth, and, as a rule, six feet in diameter, scooped out by the current that ran round the large stones. In these holes—and they numbered about a dozen down the whole length of the stream—the finest fish congregated.

We had our choice of fish in those days; if we

meant to get perch, we had them or nothing. It was the same with dace. Now these bars of living silver, if of a large size—say up to half a pound and a little over—are the most fastidious feeders in existence when they come from the river to a clear sharp stream. I knew once that a nice lot were in the stream, yet we had not discovered their haunt. I was determined to find it; and after some searching in the deepest hole, nearest the river, I chanced to see a flash of silver—a momentary sight it was—shoot to the edge of the bright gravel and then back again. It was enough, they were found; but how to capture them was the next question. It was a subject for deep consideration.

What were they feeding on? Two silver flashes next, and then they were at it. Lying down, well back, I could just see the wriggle of water-shrimps about a yard above that hole. It was enough; my light rod was put together, the finest of my gut lines attached, and then I got from a rill that ran into the stream some fine water-shrimps, which I placed in a tin box perforated with holes in the lid; some sand and water, and all was ready.

Not quite. A water-shrimp jumps along when he



travels ; it will never do for him to go into that hole as though he had got the gout. As I consider the matter, a small piece of sedge comes bobbing and jumping, down in the current. The hint is at once acted on. I break the tip off one of the sedges, and fix it about eight inches above the hook by simply making a slit in the middle of it. Then on the small hook I very carefully fix a shrimp, and hidden from sight by a huge burdock, cast up-stream above that hole. Down comes the sedge-tip dancing up and down, it nears the hole, is over it, and for one brief moment down goes that tip of flag. Snick ! we have him, and at once get him out and down-stream. I got six of the finest of dace that I have ever seen out of that hole. Then they left off biting, and I left the stream. They had began to look suspiciously on the bit of flag-tip ; and when fish begin to get shy, they are best left.

Fine eels lived there — sharp-nosed or silver eel, and the broad-nosed or frog-mouthed eel. The last named is a ferocious feeder. A large eel of this species will make his home in a place that one would never suspect. To give an illustration of his ways, a man with his boy, one I knew well, had

gone out fishing. The boy was little, and he teased his father so much to let him fish also, that the man put a dead gudgeon on part of a broken jack-line, placed the child on the bank where the water was so shallow that he could not possibly drown himself if he tried to do so, and then left him. Close to the boy's feet was part of a broken wattle, kept in place by a couple of stumps, for the bank was a little loose just there. Whilst the boy was drawing his dead dudgeon to and fro—fishing, as he termed it—something poked its head out and nipped his gudgeon, leaving the hook bare. The boy just caught sight of the head, and it puzzled him. Off he ran to his father. "Dad," said he, "I want another gudgeon, for a great toad hev got the fust un."

His father walked back with him to see the place where the toad took the fish. On the boy's tackle he fixed another dead gudgeon, and he drew it backwards and forwards as before. Out shot the head, took the bait, and vanished; but he was hooked this time: not captured, however, for when a strain was put on him, he threw his tail over a bit of the wattle—it was nearly level with the sand

—and then with a vicious dart he shot into the stream, breaking the rotten gimp like a thread. Later on he was captured; his weight was five pounds. When the time for migrating came round, I have known enormous eels caught in that pure bright stream, which I grieve to say exists in the same happy condition no longer.

## CHAPTER VI.

## NO MAN'S LAND.

SO much has been said about our over-populated country, that my title might be supposed to indicate some Ultima Thule beyond seas. I have in my mind's eye, however, stretches of table-land, comprising the border limits of the Wealds of Surrey, Hampshire, Sussex, and Kent, which are, so far as human beings are concerned, practically no man's land.

A walk of one hour from either of the three stations that lie near to that much-frequented little town in Surrey which was mentioned by Charles Dickens in connection with Mr Samuel Weller and the Reverend Mr Stiggins, will bring one to the top of a breezy and well-wooded common, command-



ing a grand view, which includes many varied points of interest. The firm and smooth highroad leads right over the common. In certain conditions of the atmosphere the huge dome of St Paul's Cathedral is distinctly visible, far away on the horizon, over distant woodlands; nearer to us the palace of glass and iron glistens in the sunlight; nearer still the grand stand on the Epsom Downs race-course shows, looking from this distance, like a small fleet of old-fashioned three-deckers. As the cloud-shadows pass over it, I seem to see once more the 120-gun boats at anchor off the garrison point of Sheerness. Old houses of some note lie at your feet, so to speak: the Deep Dene mansion, Juniper Hall—the home of French refugees of repute who fled from the Reign of Terror—Camilla Lacy, Polesden. On our left stands the house of the Master of Denbies.

As we pass on, a wilder country—the Weald of Sussex—opens out. That tower in the far distance marks the edge of the forest that at one time ran the whole length and breadth of a county, according to what the old chroniclers tell us. Redlands and Coldharbour, Leith Hill, Holmbury, and Ewhurst, with the Blackdown range of hills, are all before us,

in their perfection of autumn's shades and tones of colouring. An American friend who was lately here with me, as he looked over the splendid scene, said, "This is Indian summer in all its glory!"

The trees begin to thin off, and wild scrub takes their place. There is furze of the common sort, and the dwarf variety; also heath, brambles, and sloe bushes, locally termed pickets. Firs take the place of oak, ash, and beech; and the bracken is thin. As we jog on, we leave the common behind us and reach the edge of No Man's Land. Here you are alone, and you feel it. Strange that in two hours one can pass from London, with all its vast population and busy hum of life, its aggregation of wealth, and of human passions noble and vicious, into a land of silence, and, in some parts, of desolation. The people who are scattered here and there seem to belong to a different race from ours, and to speak a dialect peculiar to themselves. If you should chance — I use this word advisedly — to meet a human being, you may speak as plainly and as deliberately as you possibly can, yet in nine cases out of ten you will be obliged to repeat your question twice or thrice before the rustic will grasp your meaning.

The woods on either side of the narrow road are old ; trees have fallen, others are falling : young ones have sprung up unheeded and untended. To one accustomed to woods and woodcraft this tells its own tale. We are travelling through wild country, though as yet only on its borders. Presently a chimney-stack shows in a copse off the roadside, and, as we pass it, we find it belongs to a very old but substantially built cottage. What strikes us most about it is the narrowness of the window-casements. So very small are they that you might almost fancy the folks had feared to admit the blessed air and sunshine—of which they could have had little, indeed, in any case—surrounded as the place is by the dank air from the old trees. The woods and thickets, including the undergrowth, are so thick that at mid-day an unwholesome moisture reeks and broods over all. The lead-lights that originally filled those openings have been replaced with cast-iron ones as small as the ones that were first fixed there. At some remote date these have been painted white, and they seem wholly out of keeping with the old place—disturbing the fitness of things. They look now like skeletons hung about.

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No man, woman, or child is to be seen—not even a dog—though we doubt not keen eyes are watching us as we pass along, for a strange face is a noteworthy object here. As a rule, I never go to the door of one of these lonely cottages unless I am actually compelled to ask my way. For one thing, there is certain to be a dog about somewhere, and more likely than not he is loose. You may get up to the door without the brute's appearing to notice you in the least, but you will not go out of the gate again in the same state of security. If you knock—I speak from experience—no answer will you get. Some of the inmates, however, will be deliberately taking stock of you from some crack or cranny of the place. You turn at last to go, and find that the dog has come out upon you from some hole or corner, and is close behind you, giving you very plainly to understand that you will not go out at that gate until he knows what you have come in for. There is no mistaking him; if you appear to do so, he is fully prepared to settle the matter in his own way.

I feel there is no use in trying to shuffle; so I gently shift my hold on a trusty ash staff, my in-



variable companion in these wanderings, until the thick end, where all the nourishment had been concentrated, is to the front. Now if the worst comes, it will fall heavily and convincingly.

The door opens just a few inches, and a head shows indistinctly in the inner gloom, asking, "What do ye want?" Direction to a certain place which I know to be near at hand, I politely say. "I doan't 'member naunt about it, I doan't," is the churlish answer. The door is sharply banged to, and the dog at a secret sign wags his tail amicably and retires to the place he sprang from, behaving, the cunning old man-pleaser, just as though he had known one all his life.

As a rule, I avoid these lonely cottages as I would a plague-stricken dwelling. Sometimes there are two dogs round, which does not improve matters.

As we pass on, walnut-trees show in the hedges, which are mainly composed of hazels, from ten to twenty feet high. No human figure is to be seen yet of either sex; and we wonder where the inhabitants can be, for the huge fields we see from time to time are heavily cropped with roots. We turn at a bend in the road, and the hazels give

place to wild plums, the black and the lighter bullace ; crab-trees and more walnuts show ; another turn, and we have on our right a walled farm. I have never seen a building such as this excepting in Flemish paintings. Away from the road, walled in all round and surrounded by trees, it looks truly grim. There is a sort of out-of-the-world look and feeling about it. In the woods on either side some of the trees are nodding to their fall. The same grizzly-looking casements show themselves here as those we noted before.

Farther on, we come to a mansion covered with weather-stains and mosses. It has embrasures like some old battlements of ancient days. Old age is stamped over everything.

Not even a wild rabbit have we seen yet. It is not to be surprised at, for all wild creatures love light and life, and there is little of either here. The whole line of country so far has a desolate and forsaken look about it, so much so that we want to be quit of it. At length, at the end of the road, we see the entrance-gates of what one would suppose to be a noble domain. It is surrounded by flint walls. Here at least we are near human beings.

We look over the wall from the bank rising opposite to it, and sweep the wide park with our field-glass ; but time will not allow us to stay here. I know the place by tradition only ; it is a part of this district that I have never taken kindly to for reasons of my own.

There is a degree of crass ignorance and uncouthness about the rustic inhabitants of some localities that must be seen and heard to be properly appreciated, and to understand which one must go back into obscure questions of heredity and local history. The folks about here, the real natives of the soil, call the particular class I am writing about "furze-croppers" and "broom-dashers"; and there is no love lost between the two.

As they and their surroundings do not interest us, we travel on. Great fields, higher than the road that runs through them, stretch right and left—broken now and again by woods, trees, and hedgerows—away into the far distance. One can see the lonely farmsteads and mansions dotted here and there. There is barely time to sweep the vast open plain with our glass from end to end, for a resting-place must be found for the night. It is already afternoon, and a

long wild trudge is yet before us. Turning our back on the road, we strike by a narrow path into the heart of that wild land, broken with hollows, thickets, and old woods, in which are the homes of all wild things that remain to us. There the badger and the fox live their lives out in quiet. The whole of the weasel family have their strongholds in and about these wild uplands. I have good reason to believe, having information on the subject which I consider beyond doubt, that the marten or marten-cat, which is supposed to be extinct in our southern counties, could be found here if searched for. Indeed I have been assured that he *has* been found, and not long ago. "No one knows," says one of my rustic friends, "what's livin' in them 'ere woods and copses but them as goes in 'em."

Many years ago I knew these regions well. Through long summer days and the whole of many a night I have watched the life, furred and feathered, that hid itself in this wooded wilderness. Falcons, hawks, owls, crows, magpies, jays, shrikes, all have their abiding-places here. There is a wild beauty about it at each season of the year, and a certain fascination in its very loneliness. In some parts not even the tinkle of an occasional sheep-bell is to be heard.



One great drawback there is—in the danker portions of the wood midges swarm up in clouds at every step you take. You can hardly distinguish the ferocious poisonous atoms, but you feel them horribly; and they drive you almost frantic. Many of the wild creatures have owed their lives to those minute insects settling on the nose of a shooter just as he had put the gun to his shoulder. And then there is the stoat fly that swarms in this locality, to the torment of both man and beast, a shining, grey-looking insect, sometimes three-quarters of an inch in length, that first hums softly round you and then settles, light as thistledown, on some unprotected part, the neck by preference. Before you are sure what is the matter he has filled himself from your veins like any leech. These and other annoyances will exasperate you beyond endurance if you explore here for any length of time.

Even the rabbits and the hedgehogs suffer torments; in fact, some are bitten to death, literally. The pursuit of knowledge is ever attended with difficulties. A great fuss is made about the mosquitoes in tropical climates. I cannot believe they are at all to be compared with the “stoats” and midges of

No Man's Land. In no marsh or swamp have I ever been so severely punished as in the Surrey thickets of these table-lands.

Mice of all kinds abound, providing food for the vipers, or adders as they call them here, which abound. In fact, it is a paradise for them. I have handled our British reptiles—freshly caught—and examined them minutely with impunity. In fact, I may boast of as near an acquaintance with them, perhaps, as any man, and I have often wondered at the measurements of snakes and vipers given in the published works of a celebrated authority on the subject which I have by me. He quotes much from the New Forest point of view, and I can only conclude that the reptiles must be small in that district; for I have caught with my bare hands vipers by the side of which those figured and described in his book would look like puff-adders. The same fact struck me on the last visit I paid to the reptile-house at the Zoological Gardens. In the district referred to in this paper they are, when full-grown, as thick and long as those described by Mr John Colquhoun in 'The Moor and the Loch,' as killed or captured by him on the shores of his own mountain lochs. Like

himself, I have made one of the reptiles disgorge a "dog-mouse," as the rustics call it,—the large-headed short-tailed field-vole or grass-mouse, which is as large as a half-grown rat. The measurements of this little nibbler, by the way, in all the natural history publications I have as yet seen, are far below the mark.

Conditions of course vary in different localities. "Wisdom is justified of her children" in every department of life, and the fitness of things is maintained. Where there are large field-voles and large frogs, there will be large vipers and snakes to swallow them. I do not know why the smooth snake—the so-called coronella—is not mentioned in the book I referred to first; one which is well enough, so far as it goes, and its illustrations also are accurate, but for some reason or other its author has left that smooth snake out in the cold, just as the gerfalcon was by the writer of 'The Falconer's Favourites.'

To those who keep falcons and hawks, the immense fields through which we are passing would be fine places for a flight when the crops have been cleared; for the stone-curlew, or thick-knee, frequents them, as well as flocks of green plover, to say nothing of partridges,—both the common and the French variety.

This wild, stone-littered and bramble-covered district in many parts suits the latter bird to perfection. Pheasants also roam far out, so that a good hawk would truss her quarry before cover could be reached. One thing is certain, these stretches of land have formerly been hawked over, and they may be again.

It is past three o'clock, and we have still miles to walk before we can find refreshment and rest, which we feel we shall need long before we are likely to get it. I had begun to fear we were missing our way, but familiar landmarks show themselves, which, considering it is twenty years since I last struck on this track, is reassuring. Turning by a thicket a great stretch of level ground is in front of us, and there, a little to the left, is a once famous old race-course. The track is plainly visible, the whole of it, although it has not been used since the old lord's time. There, too, are the remains of ancient posts and rails, shattered into flinders and tatters, which are now only held together by the fungi and lichens that have lived and rooted in the very fibres of the once stout oak timbers. The sun is getting rather low, and all is becoming illumined with a weird light, so that the place looks and



feels eerie. It impresses me the more because the last time I was here I heard the history of this spot, and stories of its people, from one of the old lord's own retainers. I saw the noble mansion too, then—one of the finest brick houses I have ever seen, or ever shall see. Its roof showed from the fine park two miles below us. Both inside and out it was familiar enough to me, for I have worked on it myself. Directly you entered the long stone passage, from a side or business entrance leading from the park, you felt you were in one of the famous mansions of a past age. Everything, from basement to roof, was on a grand scale. Massive woodwork in profusion showed everywhere. The doorways had each of them nearly enough timber for the building of what is nowadays considered a good room. Fluted and carved, the work was a perfect mine of wealth so far as skilled labour was concerned. All was good and thorough—doubtless a source of lifelong satisfaction to both owner and builder. To myself it was always a joy to be there, and my business made me intimately acquainted with it and all its surroundings. The hall was grand: a carriage and pair might have driven in and out of it. As to the art treasures con-

tained within its walls, it would be useless for one to attempt to describe them. I thought I had seen some of the greatest works of famous men, but here indeed I found—and was allowed to study—some of their masterpieces, both in painting and sculpture, that seemed finer than any I had known of before. The rooms being noble had noble pictures to adorn them, only four usually to each room, but each one nearly the size of the wall it hung on ; and nearly all of them represented the natural life, in some form or other, of fur, feather, and fish. How often I stood before the portrait of a cassowary that hung in one room, having as a companion picture a grand ostrich, life-size, most minutely painted ! In the cassowary painting, a monkey, inimitably represented, was gazing at that bird from a gale pier.

Another favourite of mine was a huge canvas, on which was a farmyard, the poultry portion of it, at least. Besides peacocks, guinea-fowls, and the usual feathered occupants, there was a barn owl in a corner of a pigeon-cote, being mobbed by a flock of cheeky, chirruping sparrows. The bothered look of the owl, and the noisy impudence of the sparrows, was a thing to see. The free dashing manner in which the whole

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was painted was wonderful, and it showed the artist to have been a true naturalist. All who have drawn, or tried to draw sparrows, know how difficult those birds are to depict truly ; yet here was a whole roost of them ; you could almost hear their noisy din, as they choutered and scuffled about the poor owl. Another picture represented a net drawn on shore, from a lake ; pike, carp, tench, and eels were there, enveloped in its meshes, a fine heap of fish, all bundled up, wet and glistening. The net had evidently been left for a time, as five or six herons had flown down from their heronry and were minutely examining that fine haul.

An old retainer, bent nearly double, but with all his wits about him, told me that the old lord had been "a most menjous mighty gentleman for all sporting life," as his collection of pictures showed. They represented outdoor life of the early and middle part of the last century. On the wall, at the foot of the grand staircase, hung the portraits of his famous grey racer, and the jockey at its head. For background there was a bit of the old race-course and sky. I never knew who was the artist ; but the whole thing was a magnificent illusion ; it made you

fancy you were looking out of a great window at a man and horse on the turf outside. To use an artist's slang expression, "there was not a bit of paint about it;" the horse and his jockey lived and breathed.

The first time I was in that place it had just been opened after having been shut up for a quarter of a century; and from what I could gather, it appeared the noble owner had closed the house after the death of his young wife, and never visited it again. The only living creatures that ever entered it during the twenty-five years were two women-servants who had grown old about the place; and they only let in light and air at rare intervals.

The garden and stables were a long way from the house, in the grand deer-park. Below these were the fish-ponds and stews. A truly sad sight was that once fine garden, gone to ruin and disorder. The fruit-trees, such of them as were left erect—many lay prone on the ground—still bore fruit after a fashion,—peaches, nectarines, plums, and pears. The grape-houses, rotting as they stood, had fallen down through decay. Rafters and lights, plate and brickwork,—all had tumbled in; and the vines had availed themselves of all this litter and confusion, and climbed



about the ruins in luxuriant profusion, bearing fruits untended and uncared for. On and about the clusters butterflies and lizards darted and played, whilst the viper basked in the sunlight.

An entomologist would have thought himself in a paradise of insect-life within those old walls. It seemed to me as though the very spirit of desolation had made his home in that old garden. Over the lawn and on the terrace of the forsaken mansion vipers swarmed to such an extent that the front part of the house was regarded by the rustics far and near as the embodiment of everything evil, or of ill omen. The hurtful creatures basked not only on the moss-grown stones of the terrace, but even on the flags of the portico; and on the winding walks in the dell it was even worse. This dell joined the terrace, and it had long been covered with a mass of tangled herbage and tree-branches. This again joined a secluded portion of the deer-park, which had a southern aspect. No wonder the reptiles congregated in this harbour of refuge; they know well where they are in safety.

When a change came and this region of desolation and decay was to be awakened into blooming life

again, it was a matter of serious consideration how to get rid of these vermin. "Turn pea-fowl into the terrace portion of the grounds, and a half-fed rough-bred pig with her litter into the dell for a season," was the advice, given by one who knew what he was talking about. This advice was speedily acted on. Peacocks soon paraded all over the terraces and gardens, and fierce porkers rooted about in the dell, to such good purpose, that in an incredibly short time, no viper, snake, or slow-worm—nor even a frog—showed itself. One of the labourers gave me a minute account of the proceedings. "Them peacocks went fur 'em like lightnin' a'most wherever one showed out. As fur them pigs, they jest goes up, puts their fore-feet on 'em, tears 'em to pieces a bit at a time, an' champs 'em up. An' if one on 'em gets into a hole they roots him out. They likes the flasher (flavour) o' them 'ere varmint. But, I tell ye, none on us about here wud hev' them pigs ef they wus gin us, arter they bin a-wolfin' they varmin."

Our domestic fowls will kill anything of that sort if the chance offers. I have often watched a fowl joint a reptile up and eat it; an old hen or rooster makes no fuss about it, but will split the creature's

skull with one peck, as though cracking a nut. I believe pheasants also kill and eat reptiles, and I have seen a duck catch a fine slow-worm—a deaf adder as the country folks call it—and guzzle it down whole.

“I jest wish as granfeyther’s time could cum again,” said my young friend, “fur I be dry. Why, when this ’ere place was full swing in they days, a barrel o’ beer, with two horns by the side o’ it, stood outside the tradesmen’s entrance, an’ any one that passed that way could hev’ a drink ; an’ no swipes, mind ye, but the real October stingo.”

I took the hint, and relieved the man’s thirst. I wished to draw him out, and there is a saying in woodcraft that has a wide meaning—“A dry stick will not slide.”

We reach the park-gates just before the sun sinks out of sight beyond the hills. Memories of days I had not thought of for years come up in my mind. At that point, yonder, the old stag fell. He was the master-deer, and he had broken bounds, had cleared the park-pales, and taken some of the others with him. A lot of deer loose in a crop of roots is a serious matter to the farmer. Besides what the

animals eat, there is a much greater quantity spoilt. In their joy at finding themselves in new feeding-grounds, with fresh food galore, they will in quick time fork up a heap of roots with their antlers and fore-feet, which they know so well how to use.

They were got back again after much trouble ; but soon the old stag thought well to repeat the offence, and he took with him more than before. After again getting them back, the head ranger asked the master what he had better do to prevent the recurrence of such mischief. "Shoot that stag in the morning," was the prompt reply ; "give Ronald the shot, I have other matters to attend to. Early next day the keeper turned out, attended by his constant companion, a wiry fox-like collie, one from the Lake district, a "plum-pudding dog," covered with patches of light and dark slate-coloured hair, having one eye light green, with brown specks in it, the other a greyish blue. The creature was nothing to look at certainly, but he was the right sort. He seemed to glide about continually, yet was never a yard distant, and his strangely coloured eyes were continually watching his master's face as he twisted and turned closely about his legs, without ever touching them.



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I was quietly gliding some distance in their wake to see that stag shot. No fear of my being detected, for the men's faculties are all centred on the deer. Very cautiously are these moved by the under-keepers from the lake end of the park. A large deer-dog is with the old squire's son—not a deer-hound, but a creature between a blood-hound and a mastiff. The huge brute is in a slip, in readiness to pull down the fine fellow when wounded. On he comes, a frisky leader followed by his herd; in no hurry, for so cleverly have they been moved that they are hardly aware of anything being behind them. The stag comes on; soon he will pass in front of his foes. Now he is near enough; there is a report—the crack of a rifle. With a wild toss of the head he falls forward on his knees, but only for a moment, being hit in a spot not vital. He looks round, sees his enemies, and dashes off at his top speed. The great dog is slipped, and despatched to pull him down. He starts with a yell of eagerness; if noise could kill a poor stag, he would be dead in less than a minute. It only makes the fine fellow go faster, however; and that is all the dog is likely to effect, for as the great

brute gets his blood heated in his fruitless efforts to capture, he begins to show an inclination to rake off at other deer that should not concern him.

As it was now open course, the beaters having come up, it did not matter about the uninvited spectator—especially as that part of the park was touched by the highroad running through it; so I could hear as well as see all that went on.

“Blundering, savage beast of a dog! he will never get near the stag,” muttered the young squire.

“Beg pardon, squire,” said the keeper; “here is *my* dog.”

The young master looked at the strange animal with a smile of utter incredulousness. The keeper understood its meaning, and again he repeated, “Beg pardon, squire,” adding, “my dog will pull him down—and hold him, too.”

The young fellow whistled to his own great brute, which came without any ado; and it was put in leash. Then the keeper gave his dog a sign—apparently only a look, which the animal returned, his lithe body and tail swaying to and fro the while. His owner pointed with a finger, and then there was a sight worth remembering. A long grey

form appeared to fly over the grass ; the stag saw it coming, and made for the herd, joining them. But the dog, dashing in their midst like a streak, singled out the stag—on which he had, indeed, been intent from the first, although he had dutifully kept close in to heel so far. He ran him at his greatest speed ; the poor stag was going now for life.

Once or twice he dived down viciously on one side, thinking to cripple his foe by making him rush on to one of his tines ; but it was unavailing, for the dog kept just beyond the stroke. He passes the group, is hard pressed, the fence he had cleared before when after the luscious roots is in front of him. At a bound he clears it, followed by the dog.

“Lost!” cries the young man.

“No, squire,” says the keeper, quietly ; “we shall have them back presently, nearer to us. Don’t move.”

In less than ten minutes one of the watchers whispered, “Here they come!”

They came with a rush—the stag with his tongue out and his antlers laid back almost on his shoulders ; they would pass quite close to us. The keeper took

out his hunting-knife, and as the two creatures passed the dog closed. The stag sprang off his feet and came down thud on the turf, his enemy at his throat. In vain the stag struck out with those sharp fore-feet, that would cut like knives on the dog's body if they could reach it. The creature twists himself about like a snake, first on one side, then on the other, evading every stroke of the stag, without letting go of his hold. The keeper steps up, his keen knife is drawn across the stag's throat, and the antlered park-breaker lies dead.

I wonder where that keeper is now? He did not remain long with the old squire, for he was a man who would have his say when he knew he was right—no matter who stood in front of him. I met him once after the time I have been telling of; but it was far away from that deer-park. He had changed his vocation, and became a shepherd on a large upland sheep-farm. His wonderful dog still followed him closely.

"People make a rare fuss about deer," he observed, as we talked over past times. "I've had to do with 'em, more or less, all my life, an' I don't find 'em different in their ways to sheep. Wild or in parks,



they mind me o' sheep in lots o' ways ; and if one on 'em breaks bounds, an' there's sheep about, he's sure to find 'em out an' feed with 'em."

I know this is so ; for one deer was out for weeks, lying up in a wood some distance from sheepfolds, but he joined the sheep at night to feed.

By the time this episode—the killing of that offending stag—has passed through my mind, we have gone by the mansion and are out on the highroad again. Another mile will bring us to the little inn where we propose to pass the night. Great changes, so called modern improvements—modern destruction rather—have been at work here. The land I knew so well remains as usual, but a railway runs close past it, and the pleasant old-time hamlet is in a state of transition. We find the change not one for the better. The homely talk and homely country ways are giving place to more restless habits and modes of thinking. Nothing is more irritating than to see folks whom we have known jog on nicely and comfortably all their lives, wakened up and trying to ape the speech, manners, and dress of town-bred people.

As we reach the little inn it is comforting to see that it has not been improved out of knowledge

like some of the other buildings. The son of my former host has it now. He has a respect for old times, and the business of the day being over and the house closed, one or two old chums remain behind to talk over modern improvements. One and all harp on the same string, the old lord's time—that rare old time, to which distance adds a still greater charm.

After a good night's rest and a substantial breakfast, the landlord produces his modest bill, remarking, in answer to our comment of satisfaction at its smallness, that he does not believe in "swallowing folks alive when they stop at his place, for he likes to serve his customers same as he'd wish to be served if he was a-travellin'." This genial host receives a hearty shake of the hand, and we make again for the wild uplands. The valley we have rested in is only what one might call a drain from the higher portions of the land. A great quantity of water lies all round, for the hills are full of it. Directly we clear the hamlet we are once more in No Man's Land, but it differs in character from that we passed through yesterday. We have left the chalk; and sand and peat, mixed up with stones, show we are in a fir and heather district.

The road leads past high banks, evidently landslips, where the stone in huge blocks crops out, covered in places by tufts of the yellow broom. Birch-trees are plentiful—what we should consider fine specimens for this district—reaching thirty to forty feet in height. It is not often that such birches are to be seen in the south of England. Black game are about, for we have just flushed three. In climbing the landslip part we set a lot of stones rolling and startled the birds, which sprang from some rush-cover at the bottom. Mountain-ash and junipers show, and great Scotch firs in clumps. Rabbits dot all round about, exceedingly good food for the foxes and badgers ; to say nothing of the buzzards, the common buzzards, which are so very variable in their plumage, that varieties have been taken for distinct species.

The rough-legged buzzard, that dwarf eagle, pays a visit here at times to feed on these pinwire dotters. The honey buzzard comes also. Of course these wide-winged beauties are shot or trapped, nothing else could be expected of an undiscerning public. We jog on merrily here ; we are in a brighter land than we were yesterday ; there is no dampness, no torment from stoat-flies or midges. This glorious stretch

of heath makes one feel glad and thankful that the power and opportunity of watching and enjoying the living wonders of the great Creator has been given to man. I am humbly grateful for my share of this gift, and I lose myself for a while in wondering at the agnostics, so called ; also at the disciples of the theory of evolution, whom, I confess, I regard with feelings not unmixed with aversion.

In thinking of some of these I lose my head, it seems, and am brought out of my moralisings somewhat abruptly by having put my foot in a rabbit's burrow, which sends me sprawling over the heather in one direction and my trusty ash stick in another.

The great heath or down in front of us is like a vast many-coloured carpet. The autumn weather has been gracious : all is changing, yet nothing has decayed. Delicate harebells nod on their stems all around—in fact, there is a profusion of wild flowers ; heath, whortleberry plants, and the trailing species of bramble glow with bright shades and many varied tones in the sunshine ; fine juniper-trees and firs give strength and depth to the whole. Already we begin to inhale the aromatic healing odour of the fir-woods, through which our way will soon lead



for three whole miles. There will be plenty of company for us there—magpies will follow us chattering noisily, jays will squawk, and the squirrels will scold, stamp, and chatter as we invade their domain and pass through the aisles of their fir sanctuary. What amusing creatures they are when the quiet of their lonely haunts is disturbed! You can see the ends of the fir-boughs sway and bend as if moved by the wind. Fir-cones fall on you, and you pass over older dead ones which have been shaken off by the rush of the long-tailed, tuft-eared fellows. The resinous balm of the trees invigorates one, and we feel fit for any number of miles still.

The woods seem too quickly passed through, and we come out to find at our feet, in the long valley below us, one of the most beautiful rural scenes that exists in England. A little hamlet nestles at the very bottom of the hills. What few cottages there are line either side of the valley, with a path in front of each lot. A clear, rippling trout-stream divides them, bridged over for purposes of neighbourly convenience in one or two places by rough planks. The fruitful and well-kept gardens are well sheltered from all hurtful winds, down in this hollow

of the hills. The bells of the cottagers' own sheep and cows tinkle musically on the slopes above, and they themselves are quiet, decent folks—obliging, too, if a traveller needs any help that they can give, or if he has lost his way. It was not always so. At one time I remember this beautiful spot had so evil a reputation, that unless people had urgent business here, they gave a wide berth to the place. In fact, the inhabitants were mostly the descendants of lawless and bad men and women. When I first knew it, the people were under constant and strict surveillance until the worst of them were swept out. It required a man of courage and great muscular power, with full knowledge how to use both in the application of the law, to stand in the shoes of the forest-ranger of the lord of the manor in those days. I remember as though it were only yesterday the day the new ranger passed by the low beerhouse, where all the evil of a lawless gang was planned and worked out. They rushed to the open door in a body and challenged him to fight. He was a Scotchman, and like one of the deer-hounds of his country, he walked gravely and apparently impassively by without saying a word, and went into the

forest. A great rough lout, at that time the terror of the hamlet, rendered pot-valiant with bad beer, followed, deriding him and again challenging him to fight, whilst his loafing drunken comrades applauded and laughed boisterously.

“Oh, Jack,—he’ll givin that ’ere new feller a good clumpin’ afore he’ll leave him.” When Jack had got well into the cover of the trees he lost sight of the ranger.

“Druv’ ye, hev I? Druv’ ye, hev I?” roared the ruffian. “Call yerself a man, do ee?”

Suddenly, from behind the trunk of a great tree where he had concealed himself, the new ranger stepped forth and spoke.

“Eh, mon, but it’s ye that’ll have to prove yersel’ a mon afore I lose grip on ye.” Then setting to work with the grim determination of his race, he seized the great lump of fustian and corduroy, and initiated him into the mysteries of falling heavily against his will, and receiving unlooked-for and crushing blows, without having the power to return one. Then he loosed the bully, who fled.

When his boon companions saw him return, limping and battered-looking, they wondered greatly.

To their eager questions concerning his mishap, he replied surlily that he had "fell up agin summat."

With a fresh landowner, new regulations came into force, and that unruly crew were dispersed or brought into order. The country itself remains as it was, excepting for the ravages made by the forest-fires. Large gaps here and there are to be regretted, not on account of the bareness of the land, but because those very old furze covers of giant growth are gone, the like never, we fear, to be seen again. It takes a long, long time for a furze stem to reach a growth as thick as the girth of a man's leg. When they were destroyed by fire, a fresh growth sprang up directly the ground got cool and moist.

I saw the white ashes of that great fire which the foresters had so much difficulty in keeping back. The vast accumulation of fir-needles which had fallen for generations was burnt to a white mass two feet deep in places. One would have imagined it enough to destroy all promise of vegetation for years to come. It was not so. In about six weeks the bare spots were covered with green.

In certain lonely districts the old feudal system might still be in force. Those families that had lived



under its shadow for many generations seem to have transmitted some of its influences even to the present race, and the result is not a wholesome one. Boorishness does not cling only to the tiller of the soil, however; the land proprietor is often equally penetrated with it. Two artists whom I know had heard that there was a most picturesque old farm at the foot of the moorland hills on the border-land of Sussex. Starting early in the morning, they arrived at the entrance to the farm-lane after three hours of stiff walking. The lane is a public road, only where it ended and the farm began large gates were fixed, through which there was right-of-way across the farmyards, and out through the gate at the opposite side. The green woodland road was distinct enough, though of late years, 'not once in a blue moon,' as the folks said, had any one gone through by that way towards the hills.

The proprietor of the place was an ill-conditioned fellow. Possibly when he saw the pair coming up in the distance with their easels and canvasses he judged them to be land-surveyors, for directly they had entered by the first gate and closed it, two fierce gaunt dogs cleared the low garden wall, stopping the

artists, and showing their teeth in a most unpleasant fashion.

"Hi, master! Call off these dogs, please," shouted one of the two, catching sight of a man in the rick-yard.

The farmer sauntered down into the garden very deliberately, leaned with folded arms on the wall, and said, "I don't know as I shall call 'em off. Who be ye, an' who axed you to come this 'ere road? I don't want a lot of folks as I know naunt about looterin' round, an' pokin' their noses where they ain't wanted. Afore I calls them 'ere dogs in, I wants to know who ye be. Ye kin keep your tempers; them 'ere dogs hasn't bit ye yet. They be on my own ground; so be ye."

"We are artists," was the reply, "and we wish to paint your fine old farmhouse. We came from—— for that purpose."

"Then ye've come on a fool's journey. I wun't hev it painted. What do 'ee mean by talkin' o' paintin' on it?"

"Make a picture of it, we mean. You do not understand us."

"I knows naunt about picturs. You jest clear out

o' these 'ere gates an' go further afield. Ye doan't paint no picturs here. Come to heel, Wapse; come to heel, Jerry! They be goin'."

As the round-frocked pig-feeder and his two wolfish lurchers passed out of sight, the tongues of the painters were loosened, and all that could be said was said. Some time has elapsed since that expedition, but if one of the pair happens to meet the other, and says, "I wun't hev it painted!" the other grows eloquent on the subject of gorillas endowed with the gift of speech. Usually he is one of the most even-tempered men I know, but he has often expressed his great regret that he could not have had ten minutes intercourse with that surly farmer—with his coat off,—always supposing the dogs to have been first got rid off.

We have made three-parts of the circuit of these thinly peopled uplands, which I have called No Man's Land, and before we go down the hill—it is all hill and hollow—we look round. Sussex and the weald are in front of us. In descending we pass spots high up on the hillsides where you could get bogged up to your waist if you were not careful. These are the breeding-places of plovers, woodcock, and snipe. We

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shall have to pass a portion of the great weald before we climb once more,—and what a change we find here! A woodland country. Well cultivated it is. There are vast fields as in the uplands; but here, in all directions, are rustic cottages, like warm red-brown spots they show against the trees that surround them. Large manor farms too, the moated manor-houses of the past, can be seen at intervals, each one the centre of its own lands. It is a truly English landscape; no other country has such home-like features. Such of these houses as remain are just as they were many generations ago. The moats are there, crossed by wooden bridges in place of the old drawbridges. The carp and tench roll, nozzle, and root there, as in times long past, growing to such a size as would have gladdened the hearts of the monks who used to feast on them. Several monastic institutions were about this district. Many traces of them remain still. The names of some of those who yet farm these lands are mentioned in the Domesday Book.

Bright dace rise and glide, now here now there; and striped perch swim to and fro from the clear feeding-stream that comes running through the



land, ultimately to find its way to the river far away below.

Wood only is still burned in the huge fireplaces. The woodwork is all oak inside and out, and a grand oak staircase leads, from what in the olden time was an entrance hall, to the quaint and comfortable sleeping chambers.

Sunshine and life floods the whole as we pass one of these, and the people who inhabit it we know to be kindly and courteous to all who may travel their way.

The marten-cat, by the way, has been killed not far from Holmbush Tower. Nearly all these old mansions and manor-houses have or have had a belfry, or a bell-tower; and never a bell-tower yet in Sussex but has its owls, that lodge there in numbers.

The weald of Sussex is rich in traditions, and full of interest to the antiquarian as well as the field naturalist.

In bygone days the cattle were often driven into those walled farms, the drawbridges were raised, and the bell was tolled to let all around know that raiders were out. There was good cause for moats and high

walls at that time. And after all these years a remnant of that raiding element is still evident among the rustic population. "What's bred in the bone will out in the flesh."

Nowhere have I seen by river-bank or stream such lush aquatic weed and tangle as that we are looking at now, in the moat and feeding-stream of this particular old farm.

Huge docks, burdocks, water-parsley, hogweed, flags, rushes, and hawkweed, with a host of other plants, are all mixed up in a glorious flashing confusion of colour which is worth going miles to see. As I look over one of the bridges I notice the tips of the great docks and water-plantains move, and peering into that deep clear hole I see—oh, most tantalising sight to one who loves his fishing-rod!—a school of large perch swimming to and fro on the feed. The sun is getting low and my shadow is thrown far back from their swim, so that they have not been alarmed. They are searching among all the submerged stems and leaves for water-snails, and other things that love to hide in such situations.

A picture that a friend of mine painted of this manor-house, and all the wild moat tangle that sur-

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rounds it,—a wonderful and true study of southern brook tangle, is before me as I write. Some day I hope it will be before the public also. A noted impressionist, whose acquaintance this friend had once made in town,—for his canvasses do occasionally grace the walls of the Academy—heard him speak of this lovely place, and became fired with a desire to paint here. He asked my friend if he would direct him to the spot. “Certainly,” was the reply; and at an appointed time he met the London town man at the nearest railway station. After that they had a five miles’ walk before them, and art was discussed as they went: from Michael Angelo right down to Millet and Landseer—all were trotted out and jumbled together most glibly by the impressionist. My friend, much the elder man—by years, that is—listened in silence, as middle-aged people are wont to do nowadays, in the presence of their juniors. He had a small canvas under his arm. The fine picture that now hangs before me he had left with the kindly occupier of the manor farm. When they arrived at the spot the town man strolled round to my friend’s easel, and then the expression of his face altered, and it grew longer considerably. Holding

his chin in his hand, he said, "I—see—I have made a great mistake!" After all he was candid, and he owned that he had received then and there the impression that such moat tangle as that he could never paint; all his peculiar artistic fads and theories failed him before my humbler friend's subject.

The light fades, night is coming; we have, however, a good resting-place near, for this, the second night of our wanderings. The church shows first, and then a little inn, with about half-a-dozen cottages. All seems just as it used to be many years ago, and I go to make a few calls, and to find out, if I can, some of the old folks I once knew so well. It seems a reading-room has been established, and a young men's friendly society is in full swing of prosperity. This is wonderful, for the hamlet had once a very ill name, one which it fully deserved. No stranger could pass through without insult of some kind, in former days. If this was resented, the man would have a bad time of it, for the cowardly hulking fellows would combine, and do in a body what they dared not single-handed.

This bad state of things had, I believe, its first check when repairs about the old church were con-



sidered necessary. It is a recognised fact that when you once begin to pull old places to pieces and to patch them up, you hardly know where to stop. It was so in this case, and a number of workmen—myself with them—were necessarily thrown for a considerable time into that hamlet, where strangers were an extraordinary novelty.

Where to lodge was the consideration. The landlady of the inn, being evidently a nice motherly old soul, we agreed to go there all together, if she would put us up. She gladly consented to give us her largest room to ourselves; there was still ample room for her limited regular customers. For about a week all went on quietly; but after that time the natives who frequented her house began to grumble about “them ’ere dandy-lookin’ fellers hevin’ nigh’ all the house atwixt ’em. They waun’t a-goin’ to hev it, they waun’t.”

This was all put down as mere vapouring, and no one was in the least upset by it. Three days later, when we had all settled down comfortably for the evening, a rude voice was heard addressing some one of his own kind in the neighbouring room: “Tell ’ee what, us hed best hustle that ’ere lot out, neck an’

crop, an' throw 'em in ter hoss-pond, one arter t'other." It was the head bully and ruffian of the hamlet who had come in to have a spree. His companions had primed him with ale in plenty, and as he warmed to his congenial subject, he roared out—"Did us send fur 'em tu cum? I axes ye all onst agin, did us send fur 'em tu cum here?"

To this appeal his friends shouted, "No, us did not."

"Very well, then, us ain't a-goin' tu hev 'em, an' us won't."

"Hooray!" shouted the company, at their loudest.

"Look at thear cloathes! cloth, all on it. What business they wearin' cloathes better than us, eh? An' they 'arns more money, an' they doan't work like we, niver did in all their mortal lives. A lot o' lo-cusses, thet's wut they be. Let's clear 'em out!"

Here the orator got dry, and there was a lull. By the clink of glasses and the many invitations he had to drink from all sides, he must have refreshed himself considerably.

Presently he resumed. "Look at thear hands. Call 'em hands? thear gal's hands."

He had made a decided hit here, apparently, in

the estimation of his audience, for they roared and thumped the tables like so many wild beasts at play.

Not a word was spoken among us, but one and all we were quietly making up our minds no one should be put into that horse-pond in a hurry.

Once again the ruffian bellowed out—"As to that 'ere head un as they call him, ef I gits hold on his gal's hands, I'll crush un like apples in cider-press. Cum on, lads, I be goin' tu start the job ; I goes fust, you wait outside door, ye kin cum in arterwards."

Blundering footsteps approached our door through the inn passage ; it was opened, and in walked the impersonification of a ruffianly lout. As he glared round, no one spoke or moved. This disconcerted him, and he threw up his cap, yelling, "There's my hat fur the best man, or all on ye."

Very quietly the "head un," with the "gal's hands," rose from his chair, saying, "You have made a mistake, my friend ; this is a private room, and you had better leave it, and shut the door after you, or it will be the worse for you. Now, go !"

For a moment the brute was dumfounded ; then,

as the meaning of these words entered his thick head, he roared out, "The wuss fur me? I'll——"

What he was going to do was never heard, for, as he made a fierce rush, the "head un" met him, and with his "gal's hands" caught him fair by the throat. The great hulk staggered, and before he could recover himself, or knew what had befallen him, he had received a couple of blows, which sent him down like a log against the opposite wall.

It was some seconds before he could recover breath. Then he groaned out, "Massy, oh! alive! where be I?"

"You are on the floor just now, my friend," replied the man whose hands he was going to crush like cider apples. "If you will get up, you and I will transact a little business together."

The bully fairly whimpered in his drunken panic. "I ain't a-goin' tu be hit like this," cried he.

"What! you won't fight, you cur?"

"No, I wunt."

Seizing him again his conqueror cuffed him right and left, open-handed. So pitiful were his yells, that the landlady and her daughters came running in, and begged that he might be let go; so he was de-



livered into their charge, as submissive as a rebuked child, to be locked up by the good old lady in a beer-cellar. When he was let out, a little more sober than he went in, he said, "Missus, I b'leaves you've saved my life; that 'ere genelman wud 'a bin the death o' me. You'll never hear me mek a row in your house, nor give ye trubble no more. Them ere hands o' his was like lumps o' iron hittin' ye. I be took in, an' no mistake." He kept his word, and was quiet enough in her house after that.

His companions had not become involved with him, for when they saw their mighty man of valour go down, they had all suddenly recollected that they had business of importance to attend to at home.

Yes, I find a few old friends still about the place, who laugh heartily with me as they recall this and other scenes during the course of our work at the old church; and we agree that things are now much altered here for the better, in every way.

It is day again. Our three days' tramp is nearly over, a few more miles will bring us home. As we reach the hills once more, we take a bypath and follow the crests as far as we are able, except where notice-boards warn us that we are on private property. We

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are now in the beautiful Holmesdale valley district. During our three days' walk we have travelled over what I call truly "No Man's Land,"—have touched on the borders of three counties, have seen glorious scenery, and watched many a wild creature, as we jogged along. Home, rest, and last, not least, a familiar face and welcome, will be pleasant to us.

## CHAPTER VII.

## A FOREST-FIRE.

I HAVE mentioned the forest-fires. An account of the largest of these which I witnessed may not be uninteresting.

“The weather keeps very hot,” I remarked to a woodman, as I passed down a glade one evening after a ramble over the moor.

“Yes, it is hot. There’s bin a good spell on it now, nigh on to a couple of months. All under foot is dry as tinder. The top on it, I mean; it don’t meddle with the root part o’ things; for all these hills is chock-full of water, up to their very tops. But there; you knows all about that. I see ye roamin’ about many a time, and wonders what ye find.”

All at once, as I stand talking to him, a red light shoots up over the tops of the firs, and sinks down again. Then the distant note of a horn comes through the forest; the light flashes up stronger than before, and sinks again. The sounding of the horn and the light in the sky mean that the forest is on fire. Entering his cottage quickly, the woodman takes from the wall a cow's horn and blows a blast loud enough to waken the Seven Sleepers. Before its echoes have died away it is answered; and again the answer is repeated farther on.

"Wait a moment till I put on my gaiters and get my axe, and we'll go together. It would take a mortal power to keep you away from a sight like that, I reckon."

Over the camp-ground we go, and as we pass up the glade again the light from the fire, as it rises and falls, though as yet far off, flashes bright-red on the trunks of the firs.

"The wind is this way," my companion remarks, "and it is rising. Hark to the hum in the firs. Things will happen, no one knows how, at times," he continues, as we move on quickly. "But if this has been fired for the purpose like, curse the hand



that did it! for there's a lot o' stock o' one sort and another out in the forest at feed, and the fir-needles under the trees, and the heath-tops, will catch like gunpowder."

Reaching the camp-ground, we see the woodmen, axe on shoulder and billhook at side, passing on in Indian file; while now and again a blast on the horn is sounded to let the others know that help is at hand. A stranger would wonder where they all spring from; for no houses are to be seen. There are cottages hid in the glades and hollows, and down paths known only to themselves they come, to aid those who are in danger from the fire.

"Are you coming on with us?" they cry as they recognise me. "All right—keep up with us."

"Where is the fire?" I ask.

"In the long valley. If they can keep it there it will only clear the firs; but if it breaks through, there will be wild work to-night."

And now we near the fire which is raging in the valley below. The firs are all ablaze for two miles in length,—a sight to be remembered.

"Let me have your billhook; I can use one," I cry.

"Here you are. I've got my felling axe. Give 'em a rattler to let 'em know we are close handy."

With whoop and halloo we dash down the valley—horns sounding. What a sight it is! Men and boys, some of the latter mere children, cutting, hacking, and beating with fir boughs to thrash out the fire. "Here they come, lads, to help up. Well done! for we are near beat." No time for many words; the situation is taken in at a glance. The men take their places in knots of twos and threes. The boys are on the edge of the fire with their boughs for beating.

"Where are the stock?" is the inquiry shouted.

"Ahead of the fire; but in the cover we can hear their bells. They are not far off; they will break cover directly; look out for 'em!"

And now we can see the fire. At racing speed it gathers, in one sheet of flame, running up and overtopping the firs, with one fierce lick clearing all before it. With bellow, snort, and bleat, the animals, mad with fright, break into the glade which parts the two hills. The ponies, some with colts, rush past with shrill neigh and whinny, nostrils distended, and their shaggy manes tossing from side to side. On the crest of the hill they halt for one moment, looking like

demon horses against the sky-line. With loud bellowing, a cow, having at her feet a three days' old calf, comes in sight. The weak toddler is not able to move very quickly, and the mother, trying the while to assist and guide her calf with her nose, roars in agony as she sees the fire drawing closer to her. "Go for her, lads!" is the cry. With a rush three of them break through the burning cover, and lifting the calf in their hands, bear it to a place of safety, the mother following close behind. The sheep, in one drove, irrespective of owners, rush up and over the crest of the hill, down in the direction of the trout-stream. Combined with the sound of axe and billhook, and the beating of branches, come the cries of wild creatures just ahead of the line of fire. "Don't let 'em suffer—kill all that can't clear the fire!" An act of mercy, for the rabbits shriek with fear, while the hares, bewildered with the smoke and flames, limp about hither and thither. "Thrash 'em out lads!" "Give 'em a chance for their lives!" "Rouse 'em up!" are the cries. "Black game ahead. Thrash 'em off!" "There they go!" Two of these, dazed by the fire, fly right at it. Caught in that sheet of flame they drop like singed moths, to be at once despatched

by the boys who are fighting the flames. The cries of wood-pigeons, partridges, black game, and pheasants—to say nothing of jays and magpies, and the scream of sparrow-hawk, with screech of missel-thrush and ring-ouzel—mingled with roar and crackle of the flames, make a most unearthly din ; while fern-fowls fly and dart in all directions. Many, drawn by that strange fascination which fire seems to have for wild creatures, dart right into it to be killed at once ; their light, loose plumage shares the fate of moths' wings. Insect-collectors can keep away from this locality for many a day to come. The peaty surface, for a long distance, has become a mass of fire.

Now loud shouts and sounds of horns tell of some fresh misfortune. There is not the least hope of confining the fire to the valley. Within half a mile of the firs, which are now one mass of fire, there is a vast cover composed of furze and ragged black thorns. Between this and the blazing trees is a long belt of heath. The woodmen do their best to keep this from getting alight. All their force is gathered here. Grimed all over, they look like giant goblins as they ply axe and bill to fell the remaining trees not yet caught. No use ! “Stand back for your lives, lads ;



it is on us! Stand back!" With a roar like thunder, and in one red sheet of flame, it burst out and laps the heather. A few hurried words and half the band rush down the hill into the valley beyond. There is a small farm there. The rest skirt the side of the hill, driving all stock that may be in their line before them. I, with my companion, go to the farm. Like men gone wild, they cut and slash and carry all furze and heath away from the farm enclosure. "Well done, lads! well done! Saved by the skin of the teeth! Look! mercy alive!" The furze cover is on fire. Not many live things are left to roast there; they had good warning, and here they come, a mixed flock of birds full bat overhead, showing, in that fierce light, as distinctly as if you had them in your hand, for their flight is low down—just overhead, no more. One or two are caught with outstretched hand, tired out by their first flight from the firs in the valley, which has proved to many of their kin to-night a valley of death. Next comes a sight seldom seen: rabbits, a few hares, and right in front of them a fox. As misery makes man acquainted with strange bed-fellows, calamity causes him to rub shoulders with

those he would otherwise most avoid. So it is, too, with the forest animals and birds to-night. On the poor things come, dotting along in what might appear to a casual observer a most unconcerned manner. Those who are familiar with them know better. They are almost stupefied with terror. Blackened with smoke and parched with heat and thirst, we rush on ; for the fire has taken a direct course for the hamlet. There it will be met by a reserve force ready for action. The horns have long before given warning in which direction it is coming. One homestead is in the direct line of fire ; only the paling fence surrounding the garden separates it from the moorland. Here come the lads—fifty or more of them ; they are met by the force from the hamlet. “Sharp’s the word, lads !” Over a hundred men and boys cut and tear and carry the heath and furze away from about the house to the line of fire, which is now close at hand. More than one youngster is caught up, bough and all, and brought out of its reach. “Here it comes ! Look out ! Stand back !” Shouts, horns, and shrieking whistles give notice to any one who may be below ; and to make

quite sure a party of men dash down the hill, across the moor, and on to the road which divides a portion of the moor from the other bog-land. In a red-hot sheet of flame, it advances with a roar high up ; driven of the wind, it clears and passes on over the crest of the hill ; and with a rush down the other side, passes over the wet moorland ; then it dies out, stopped by the wide highroad. With clothes scorched and torn, black as sweeps, we called the roll over.

“ Any one hurt ? Speak up ! ”

“ No, no.”

“ Any stock hurt ? ”

“ No.”

“ Anybody thirsty ? ”

“ Every man jack of us ! ”

“ Yes,” on all sides.

“ And you shall have the beer, too, if I have to start brewing to-morrow,” shouts a voice close at hand. “ But I reckon I won’t have to do that ; and the young uns—them that belongs to the temperance and Band of Hope—shall have milk ; and if there ain’t enough for ’em in the dairy, somebody

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will have to milk the cows again before morning, for there ain't no doubt but what that 'ere fire would have done a lot of rampagerous damage—not but what it's done enough as it is—if you lads hadn't cut away as you did. So you jest come and rinse the smoke and ashes out of your throats.”



## CHAPTER VIII.

## MORE FISHING NOTES.

THERE is a pleasure in going back, as we smoke our quiet pipe in the corner of our own fireside, on those expeditions for the capture of the gamesome, if coarse, sort of fish ; memory calling up not only the fish but the *men* ; those quaint characters, with their tackle of a bygone day, whom Thackeray loved, and even Lytton did not despise to take cognisance of ; who have often made Leech's drawings full of flavour, and whose primitive manners and racy speech gave added interest to water-side wanderings. Poor old "fishing Billy," as he was always called ! We know him and his fraternity well. Some of these quietly rest in the village churchyard ; but "rheumatiz" and lifelong habit leave as yet no rest to Billy, who frequented the water-side so long, that at last his

friends stepped in to prevent it, fearing some accident to the semi-paralysed piscator. Fishing for pike on the banks of a river, when winter has set in sharp, is likely, after a man has passed sixty-four, to prove injurious to the system. Dear old reader, beware ! Smoke your pipe, and read of angling by your own or your friend's fireside ; but, like myself, visit the haunts of pike in winter-time only in your mental retrospects, and you will have pleasure enough in recalling many an encounter with jack-pike ; and together therewith can adorn your tale with the dry humour of such attendants on your sports as Billy, or the pathetic character of the man who fished, year in and year out, for a certain one-eyed perch, for which see ' My Novel.'

But to Billy. Some time before his forcible detention round about his home, on the part of his too loving friends, I found him on the bank-side to which I had repaired for the tug of war. It was in a stretch of deep water succeeded by a shallow, alternating from a foot to two feet in depth, outside the belt of reeds and water-tangle which rotted from season to season, that Mr Pike had his home. " He lays there," said Billy, shaking his head, " but I can't

reach him ; 'tis too risky for me ! Give him a turn ; kill him if you can ! ” As we neared the haunt of the fish, I prepared for action : I knew I could trust my tackle. The lure was a bright dace of near half a pound, and I intended to *spin* it. The old boy had been pottering about in his own fashion : he had tried all the means he could think of before he mentioned the lay of the pike to me. After watching the spot for half an hour I found the pike was at home, and moreover, that he was on the feed. Now for it ! The cast is delivered up-stream and spun in a slanting direction to his lair. There is a sensation like the hooking of a sunken bough, but far more lively. “ Take that ! ” say I ; and the pike has it home, and no mistake, for he leaps like a trout clear of the water, sure sign that he has got the hook. Then he makes for deep water. It is of no use, for we hit him up again, and turn him for the shallows, where we have him as we please. He is a good fish : Billy calls him a rattler. But that we can see about presently, if all holds good. Smack goes his tail as he hits the water, and he tries to bore down, but it is no good, for the next minute he is at our feet, a twelve-pounder.

A favourite haunt of the pike, which we have often visited—and hope to visit again if all goes well with us—comes vividly before me. An old grey bridge was there, spanning a narrow river in the heart of the woodlands. Nothing is now left by time and winter floods but the crumbling arches and the old track on top: the parapet which protected either side has gone long ago, for the oldest rustic in the village could not tell us when it was in a different condition. Rustic folk-lore hands it down as a tradition—and we have found as a rule that there is much truth in rustic lore—that the bridge belonged to the Catholic community of olden time that owned the mills above and below it. There it stands, gradually crumbling to pieces: neither waggon nor cart passes over it now, and a very occasional foot-passenger, who, in most cases, carries a rod. There is a sharp run of water above, the home of bright silvery dace, herring-size, and now and again good thick trout, real beauties. These, with the bright glancing bleaks—or, as they are sometimes called, willow-blades—live in this shallow water above the ruined bridge; and they keep there, if they can, for they know what is in store for them below. We have seen a shoal of dace throw



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themselves out of the water when the pike have left the deep water below and rushed for them on the shallows. We have known this to take place once or twice in the season when the shallows had been deserted by them, as they are at certain times. After the run of water has cleared the bridge, it forms a deep pool, wider here than the water above it. This bit is the haunt of pike, good ones when you can catch them. I have often come home empty-handed so far as *fish* went, but there is always some slight consolation in knowing they are there. And what could be better, for lingering near, than this bit of water? Old oak pollards are dotted here and there; a luxuriant growth of ferns and plummy thistles crowns the top of the banks, hanging over in places. Where the rifts have been washed out underneath by the floods, stunted willows, the stone-crop osiers of the rustics, have rooted thickly; huge docks are mingled with them; then come the sedges to the water's edge. A fringe of water-lilies, about six feet in width, follow; beyond there is deep water, free from any obstacles, and just below the pool a shelving sandy shore.

We are ready. Out shoots the roach to the far side, merrily it spins as it comes across the slant to

us; now for another cast; out flies the roach in another direction; as it nears the lily-leaves, a long flash of white shows for one moment. It is all right, he has taken it close home. When we think he has had time to pouch it—for we are not using snap tackle—first seeing that the line is clear from a foul with the lily-stems, then letting out line, and seeing that all is clear about our feet, very gently we bring it up through the rings, close up, and hold it by the forefinger of our right hand close to the butt. Now for it! Take that! One! Two! What a commotion! With a rush the fish leaves his lair for the open water: he springs right out of it, coming down with a great splash, making the water fly in all directions. This we acknowledge by lowering the point of our rod to him. By simply raising it again we have command over him directly. He is a nice short thick fish, so far as we have seen of him, between six and seven pounds in weight; certainly a plucky one, for he fights like a game-cock. But the game ends in our favour, for we land him on that shelving sandy shore, and admire him greatly.

I have now done with the pike, but should consider my notes on the subject incomplete did I not add a

few lines to what I have already said about the tackle and bait used for his capture, and also in regard to a quite other foe of this fish than the follower of the gentle craft.

As to tackle, have it of the best, neat and strong; and your baits, living or dead, of the freshest that can be procured. It is the same with pike as it is with certain people who rejoice, as a rule, in excellent appetites—they require a little coaxing at times.

The salmon, one of the strongest, if not the strongest, fish that visits fresh water, is captured with a gaudy lure called a fly, tied on a cast of gut. Pike-fishers have taken the hint lately and profited by it.

Trimmers and night-lines have been used in some waters lately for the capture of huge pike which had lived there far too long. To the great surprise of those who set the lines, the baits had been taken, and the pike or pikes disappeared. That the baits had been taken they had conclusive evidence, for in some instances a portion of a pike's jaw was found on the hook or hooks. As this occurred on private waters well watched, there was a mystery about it which remained unsolved. Would it not have involved an interference with the business of others to have done

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so, I could have cleared it up for the persons concerned. I know that otters haunt that place, and have done so for years. Those who are familiar with the otter and his ways know that he is very carnivorous when the chance offers, like his distant relative the badger, for they both belong to the weasel family. Their dentition proves the fact conclusively. The otter is the amphibious representative of the family. Fur, feather, fish, or frogs, he devours all, as they come in his way. A well-grown dog otter, from twenty to thirty pounds in weight, is, for his size, a very powerful creature, especially in the water. When Mr and Mrs Otter are "on the root" and sharp set—and as a rule they hunt in pairs—live things can look out. Those huge pike, free and unfettered, they would not care to tackle. Smaller fish suit them far better, for they can kill them easily; whereas a big pike will make a fight for it. But when they find one on a night-line, they go for him, the pair of them. One grips him by the gullet, the other near the tail, and they tear him off the hook. Then they drag the great fish to cover. If there is a large wood-pile or fagot-stack near, so much the better; failing this, the river tangle answers their purpose. A small



furze cover next the banks of the river suits them admirably.

The dace, in water suited to him, ought to be prized by the angler. Three or four miles of unbroken fishing on the same river will, however, show a difference in size and quality of the fish taken which is hard to credit if not personally investigated. A shoal of dace, herring-sized, plump and silvery, well on the feed on a clean wide shallow, give, in my opinion, as good sport as trout. I knew one spot that was noted for fine dace. There was a quiet stretch of water above, gradually lessening in depth as it neared a small island which was covered with the finest feed for cattle. These used to wade into it from the meadows on either side, and graze knee-deep in the rich herbage all the day long. This small bit of detached meadow formed two streams that met again before reaching the old bridge, shooting rapidly under the arches on to the broad, bright, gravelly shallow below. As springs abounded here, the water was as clear as crystal. Weeds covered the bottom in places—short velvety green weeds, which are the delight of the angler, for the larvæ of the numerous flies live in the weeds and on the gravel. The various

species, which are many, before reaching perfection as flies, are called "stick-maggots," a very comprehensive term. Luscious water-snails flourished in the green growth; whilst near the roots, in every little hollow caused by the current, as the weeds waved to and fro, the water-shrimps scuttled in thousands. Most nourishing fish food for all fish are the nimble shrimps. Through the old arches of the bridge the kingfishers flashed in their flight up and down stream. Where the current had forced up little patches of sand and gravel above the surface of the water, wag-tails tripped; or the summer snipe or sandpiper, the will-wicket of the river-side, ran nimbly or balanced his body up and down, flirting his tail. Willows, alders, and elms in the meadows, thickly clustered in some places, scattered in others, with the quaint old houses of the village, and the church in the distance looking out over the trees, made a beautiful picture of river-side scenery.

An artist friend of mine, who can handle the rod as well as he can use the brush, painted it before the so-called improvements for the preservation of the water had taken place. Old bridges when restored lose very much of their artistic value. Some of them

have been renovated to such an extent as to be almost beyond recognition. When we once went together some distance to paint a very picturesque old country bridge, covered with mosses and lichens of past generations, half hidden in a grand tangle of docks, water-parsley, loosestrife and meadow-sweet—a perfect picture as we had been accustomed to see it—and found when we got there that it had been restored, we had a few words to say on the subject that need not be recorded. For the brickwork had been cleared off and the mortar-joints fresh painted. The glorious tangle had been cleared away, and in its place were some brand-new posts and rails, painted white. As we returned home we indulged in moody speculation on the mutability of things in general.

But to return to our subject. I was looking one morning at the scene I have attempted to describe, not with the purpose of fishing, but considering the points for a picture, when down the meadow strolled “Gentle,” a youth who got this appellation from the fact of his providing anglers with this most useful bait summer and winter. He was between nineteen and twenty; as to his clothes, a thing of shreds and patches; as an angler, one of the best who ever

fished that part of the river. His long rod was all one piece, of his own make, but composed of four or five lengths of different woods, well seasoned and skilfully spliced, the joints whipped over in the most workman-like manner. I knew him well—indeed at that time all the frequenters of the river-side were known to me more or less. After returning my greeting he asked, “What d’ye think I’m going to hev a flick for this mornin’? Dace, big uns too; they’re on the feed in the shaller, at gnats—little black gnats! Don’t ye see ’em break? That shaller is alive with ’em. I’ve been tryin for ’em, but ’twas no go. Then I gits in the water a goodish bit below ’em, an’ I see these ’ere gnats come floatin’ down. Out I gits, goes ’ome, an’ makes a couple o’ casts of ’em; for I got some of ’em to copy like. One of ’em is on the cast, t’other’s roun’ my hat. It’s a long cast, an’ a two-handed one, but I ken reach ’em. I wishes you’d tell us when I’m gettin’ near ’em, for they’re feedin’ a ‘bit fine.’”

He was a brother of the craft was Gentle. Down I went on my knees, then I could see to an inch where they rose at the fly. Never have I seen a better bit of casting then I saw that clever active



scarecrow perform that morning. One or two preparatory flourishes, to get the line out, and the first cast was delivered. "How's that?" said Gentle. "A yard short from the outside rising fish!" "All right, I'll hev it next time! Where are 'em risin' most?" "In the middle." "How's that?" "Right!" I answer, rising from my knees, "your gnat is among them." It was, for in less than an hour from the time his fly reached the shoal, he had a basket of the finest dace we had ever seen. He was a most disreputable figure to look at, was poor Gentle, but clothes go for nothing; it is the *man* one regards. Gentle had got most of his schooling down by the river: he could read and write fairly enough, but he said that he had learnt more there than anywhere else. And in this he was right; those who pass all their time in close communion with Nature and in careful observation of her many and various manifestations get lifted above the life of ordinary men. It was so with the simple but true-hearted Gentle.

That handsome fish, the roach, gives the angler good sport summer and winter. Summer, of course, is the time the general public prefer for fishing, and

it is certainly the pleasantest ; but the very best fish, both for size and beauty, are caught, trout excepted, in late autumn or mid-winter. Fish require food in winter-time and they get it by simply shifting their quarters. Any angler of experience will soon find out where they have got to, and act accordingly. Roach from a pound to a pound and a half are worthy of your steel, but we have them from a pound and a half to two pounds, for they vary according to the water. Such fish are very fastidious as to their habitat. It is not often you are fortunate enough to find a swim such as the one I shall describe ; when you do, take with you a brother of the gentle craft and introduce him thereto, and he will not forget this proof of your friendship. I recently made a painting of a couple of roach from this water. These fish weighed three pounds and a half ; the pair were bright as silver. The feeding stream comes from the hills. So great is the supply, that within half a mile from the source a beautiful lake is formed—one of Nature's mirrors set in the woods which surround it on all sides.

Close at hand, in perfect keeping with its beautiful surroundings, on the slope of one of the hills, stands the mansion of one of the old gentry, round

which gather many an ancient tradition and kindly memory. Modern improvements have not altered any part of the natural surroundings. The house and its traditions were well known to us through faithful retainers, whose forefathers had been settled on this woodland estate for generations past. It is good to see the kindly and reverent way in which those who have so faithfully served identify themselves with this family, whose name is honoured by all who know them. Even the very animals and birds are gifted in the eyes of these old retainers with qualities not possessed by such creatures outside the pale of the estates.

Old Dan'el had seen sixty summers and winters when I first made his acquaintance. "I've been house carpenter on this 'ere place," he told me, "since my father died, an' he was here afore me. The old squire was a real kind sort o' man; when he walked down to the lower gardens the 'osses and cows 'ud just foller an' rub their heads agin' him. I've sin 'em do it times an' agin, I hev; yet he waun't a gentleman as 'ed let the least bit o' liberty be took with him. He used to feed them 'ere peacocks on the gravel-walk front of the terrace steps reg'lar,

an' there they'd strut about an' show theirselves off, a reg'lar treat. One on 'em, a fine old feller, was a favourite with him. He was a dangerous customer for some to git near, but to the squire he was as gentle as a blind kitten. When the old squire took to his bed, that 'ere bird left t'others that roosted in the trees, an' cum tu roost on the top o' the house by the big chimbleys o' th' old squire's room, an' there he'd set all night through, his tail hangin' down the roof. The night the squire died, that 'ere bird screamed his loudest—none o' the others, mind ye, only he. I heard un down at my place, an' I couldn't sleep, so I gits up an' goes to the house, fearful like; an' then I hears that the good old master had passed away when that 'ere bird was screaming his loudest. There's somethin' in these 'ere things, mind ye, as goes beyond our reck'nin'!"

From here, as old Dan'el observed, the stream supplies two mills. At the mouth of a third mill-pool is our roach-swim, a short canal-like stretch, at the end of fertile water-meadows, of four to five feet in depth, nothing suggestive of fish about it; but fish are there, and this is the way they are captured. No paste, no gentles, no delicate porcupine quill-float,—nothing of



the kind! As I have before stated, different waters require different methods. This is ours here: a stiff light rod twelve feet long, a good gut-line—we mean by that stout, not fine-drawn, with a small perch-hook whipped on; for float, one of my own make, the size and shape of a large acorn, with a slit in the middle for the line to run through. The line is not shotted above the hook-length; to the gut-length some fine silk twist line is attached. When the line is placed through the loop of the top joint, the surplus line is wound round one of the forefingers. Then from the moss we take a dew-worm and place him on the hook, whole—not the tail of him pinched off. We throw in slowly; the float travels down; slowly the current takes it to the side of the crumbling bank on the opposite side to our standing, and then something stops it. That acorn-shaped cork makes two little jerks on the surface, as a small mouse jerks along when he comes out for crumbs—stands on end for one moment and then goes right away. Snick! we have him, and the bend of the rod tells us that he is a good one. He is grassed and others follow, but we stop at three pairs, for there is a vast deal of difference between sport and slaughter. The roach, when large,

is exceedingly artful ; and, for sport, by no means to be despised.

Bream give very good sport for those who like such quarry. I am not able honestly to say that I admire even the filleted bream. As one of my old angling acquaintances, who always fished in a white flannel jacket and a rusty black drain-pipe hat, used to say, "They allers hev a mispicion of mud about 'em." The word suspicion he never could master ; but the emphasis he gave at all times, in season and out of season, to the substitute, fully made up for the defective etymology. If I do not greatly love the bream, I do admire his haunts and surroundings. Picture to yourself a calm stretch of deep water close to the edge of the woods through which the river flows in its course to the Thames, long stretches of meadow-land, finely timbered on either side, the edge of the water fringed with king-cups and yellow iris, and many other plants which make the river-side so very beautiful. The water flows on with that slow oily motion which at once tells the angler naturalist that fish are there, and large ones. The simple movement of a twig, appearing above the surface from some branch of a limb submerged below, is quite

sufficient evidence; when this is supplemented by a gentle twirl, parting the river-foam which has settled in this oily pool, the evidence is complete. They run an enormous size here; those who are familiar with the substantial household implements called bellows, may form some idea of the size and appearance of a good-sized bream, one of the two varieties having received the local appellation of "bellows" bream.

Moor-hens haunt this stretch of water in great numbers. Careful as they are about their broods, they do not rear them all; the fish pouch numbers of the young ones. Water-voles and rabbits have their holes in the river-bank, side by side. When floods come they are driven out in all directions. Here in mid-day the fox creeps through the ferns on the slope above, and hides in the iris clumps, on the watch for rabbits or moor-hens. The first come, the first snapped, is his motto. And the otter can be seen at times in the meadows at play with her young ones, like a cat with her kittens. Cattle feed in the rich grass, dragon-flies dash here and there after their insect prey, while the sedge-warblers chant and chide as if in reproach of the river's sleepy flow.

As a fish for sport barbel is held in high esteem,

but so far as I am concerned in the matter, he is not a favourite, nor do I care for the means employed for his capture.

Carp and tench are, to a certain extent, local. Some of those old moated farms on the borders of Sussex, which were at one time manor-houses, have large ponds attached to them. So secluded are these houses and the ponds, that very few outside the weald district know of their existence. All the land is more or less clayey. Huge bulrushes fringe the margin of the ponds; and water-lilies, both yellow and white, grow luxuriantly. In such situations carp and tench do well. Rods and lines are almost unknown, at least they are never used for their capture. The consequence is that the fish are almost as unsophisticated as some of the people; there are exceptions, nevertheless, to every rule. One thing I know, they will take worms as freely as perch. When the angler, who has put his rod down to light his pipe, finds, on turning round to pick it up, that his eighteen feet of bamboo is in the water, making tracks for the middle at a rapid rate, he may conclude that something in the shape of a good fish is at one end of it; the thing is to repossess himself thereof.



Gudgeons, miller's thumbs, loaches, and the silvery nimble minnows are the children's fish. Either one or other of these forms the first capture of the youngsters. The sticklebacks, in the southern counties that are best known to me, are not admitted into the fishing list. They are captured by the hands. I know that as baits for perch, in spite of all that has been said about their formidable spines, they are very effectual. Eels, I think, can hardly be considered as a sporting fish: such of my angling friends as have accidentally captured one whilst seeking other fry have been sorely tempted to speak unadvisedly with their lips, their top joint being smashed, and the line all in a knotted tangle.

It pleases some men to promote the propagation of the trout family in their many varieties, in localities where they have never been before, to the banishment of other fish, which have been for centuries indigenous to those waters. For my part, I heartily wish the trout was not so much to the front as he now is. Still, those who own the water, or rather the ground through which the waters run, have a right, I suppose, to sweep all fish out of them if they can, and to restock them with bull-frogs, if such be

their pleasure. I honestly think over-strict preserving is not acting beneficially as regards coarse fish, so called to distinguish other fresh-water fish from the trout.

In order to promote this game fish, ponds have been cleared of other fish, brooks also. Weeds, the beautiful fresh-water weeds, have been cut or raked off from the bottom : in doing so, Nature's own filters and purifiers, in hundreds of ways, have been destroyed, and food for the fish therewith. None but those who have brought a double armful of bright green weed to the bank, and examined it closely, can form any idea of the various small creatures that live in it, all of them food for the fish that have their habitat in the water where they grow. If the trout flourished in proportion to the trouble taken, there would be something to say for it ; but they do not, so far as I have observed, and other fish suffer from the removal of the natural aquatic growth. Trout, in my opinion, are best left to the care of the connoisseur, who should carefully inquire into the relative merits of the natural and artificial method of stream-purification and of food. I think myself that the care above described is such as the trout does not at all times benefit by. A clever im-

prover on Nature's laws is often but a poor bungler, who thinks he knows more than the Creator of the water and of the creatures that live in it.

One moorland brook comes before me as I write—not a stream—one that a first-class steeplechaser could barely clear with his blood up, and at his full stride. A full mile in length it is, and from four to five feet deep, with sand shallows here and there. In it I, with as cheeky a lot of schoolboys as ever thrashed—larrupped, we called it—peoples' doors or robbed apple-orchards, learned to swim. When we tired of swimming, we would make for the glorious weeds that flourished in the shallower portions, and bury ourselves in them. No couch of eider-down could be half so luxurious as the waving, soft bright green weeds, containing Nature's stores of food for the fish and aquatic birds — both swimmers and waders. Not only did we bathe there, but we fished—not with lines, but with our towels used as nets; a deadly proceeding for the fish. Yet it did not lessen their numbers, it only made room for others to come down from higher up-stream. Preserved water, so-called, was at that time unknown.

I have examined the masses of weed carefully and

minutely, taking whole days over it. What I have found would give my readers matter for wonder. The vast food-supply contained there was something marvellous. The pike, for instance, must have weeds both for shelter and for food-stores; he will not flourish without them. Reeds, weeds, and pike are inseparable in my mind. As I have lain in that brook luxuriating in the moist warmth, after the sun had been shining brightly in midsummer, I have felt the gudgeons, loaches, and the miller's thumbs scuttle over my body—nay, even resting on me as I lay. That brook was alive with pike, perch, trout, roach, gudgeon, loach, and miller's thumbs.

By the way, even the viper is a most expert swimmer. I have seen him by the brook-side: a dreaded foe to the mouse family he is. That reptile is far more feared than he deserves to be. In our brook there was room for all—boys, birds, fish, and reptiles.

One day we were told we could not go there any more. What! not bathe and fish in our beloved brook? We could not credit our ears, and we hooted our informant as only boys can hoot. Then we went there again at once, in defiance.



Alas ! we had to yield to superior force, I will not say intelligence. They were setting to work on that happy hunting water. First they cleared the weeds out, then they levelled the bottom ; in this process, as a matter of course, they broke up all the homes of the inhabitants. They put cart-loads of rubble in, for the fish to spawn on. Then, to crown all, they stocked the water with fish that could not live there. The brook, having lost its natural purifiers, lost all its brightness and purity, and the fish could not get food. Water-snails, water-shrimps, caddis, and water-beetles, and a host of other minute creatures had perished with the weeds that had been so foolishly raked out, and left to rot on the banks of the brook.

For fifty years I have explored in Nature's domains as a field naturalist ; I have given close attention to such subjects as the above, and the result of my experience in the matter is, that after the lapse of a few years, whatever course may have been taken by the owners of our soil and waters, all things come round again as they were before—Dame Nature, with her inevitable law of the survival of the fittest, re-asserting herself here as elsewhere.

## CHAPTER IX.

## WOODCOCK, SNIPE, AND PLOVER.

THE woodcock in times past was a bird little known to the general public; to most he was a feathered myth, heard about but not seen. As a boy I have often listened with admiration and wonder, not unmixed with awe, to accounts given by some sportsmen relatives in our marsh-lands, of their having had the good fortune to shoot a cock or even a pair of these birds. That was spoken of as by a rare chance, and the "how, when, and where" were given with much exactness and detail. They never kept them for their own table, but invariably presented them to gentlemen who were known to enjoy such game. Curious and strong prejudices existed amongst our folk in regard to

eating and drinking. Of woodcock I remember they used to say, "Birds thet wus always suckin' stuff out o' pools an' dykes could not be good for much. Frogs did that, an' Frenchmen fed on frogs." The connection between woodcocks and frogs I always failed to discover, beyond the fact that both got their living in moist places. I can remember also the account that was brought home of the cooking and serving up of one particular pair that had been so presented; and the very wording of the note of thanks the gentleman wrote in acknowledgment of "the luxuries so kindly forwarded." The note was thought much of, and religiously treasured, as having been "writ by the squire's own hand." The manner of the bird's cooking was also told in strict confidence by the squire's cook. I recall it all as though it had happened only yesterday, and the expression of thankfulness, echoed by all at our tea-table, that none of them had "got to eat such frenchified muck as that." And then the climax was reached when one told how tomatoes—or, as they called them, "love-apples," were freely eaten by the same gentleman, cooked as vegetables, and also raw as fruit, freshly plucked

from the vines. "'Tis a real wonder as gentlefolks doesn't pisen theirselves," was the universal comment on this statement. Good vegetables from a gentleman's garden I have often known refused with scorn. "They never had eat 'em, and they waun't a-goin' to use 'em now."

The woodcock is the prince of his family. Note him as he steps out from under the drooping branches of juniper and holly, where he has been bunched up on the dead bracken and withered mottled leaves that match his exquisitely pencilled plumage of browns, fawns, drabs, and smoke-greys, barred and scrawled over with still darker tones, that are neither black nor brown. So perfectly does the plumage fall in with the tones of his resting-place that a man might almost touch him in passing by—and, in fact, such has often been the case. Only his glorious eye, formed like that of the owl to catch all the rays of light in the gloaming, might betray the bird's whereabouts to the wandering naturalist, who slips round his haunts by day with movements as quiet as those of the rabbits that dot about, near his hiding-place. Scientists have stated that the woodcock is a night-feeder. I have no wish to dispute as to that; but it is on comparatively



light and clear nights that he will do best. In dull weather, too, I have known him leave his snug covert to "fossick" about with that wonderful long bill of his, well furnished as it is with sensitive nerves, in the dead leaves of the scrub oaks. A plump, dainty-looking, well-set-up creature he is, as he trips here and there with head knowingly held on one side, his bright, full, moist eye glistening. That bit of velvety green turf beside the runnel shows him off to great advantage—in fact he is no longer a brown bird, the green shows him up as the beautiful creature he truly is, as delicately marked as the wryneck.

A wood-pigeon claps off from the branch of a fir-tree near at hand: it is quite enough to startle our friend, and he squats down as closely as ever a toad—bee-snapping Gabriel, our rustics call him—squatted when he heard the owner of the bee-hives coming where he had been devouring the inmates wholesale. And now he is on his way again, turning and sorting the dead leaves from side to side, with an occasional upward flirt of his tail that shows the white and black markings, a movement that has proved fatal to numbers of his family in the olden times, when the falcon was used for their capture. In a work on falconry

that I possess, I read how the owner of a favourite falcon went out with it to fly at the woodcock. Finding him at last in the glade—the bird's action of flirting up his tail having betrayed him—he flushed him, and threw off his falcon. One bird tried to mount right above the other until both were mere specks, and soon lost to sight, then both came to earth together, the falcon fast bound to her quarry. The flirt of the tail still betrays the woodcock to the eager sportsman; and when his breech-loader has laid the bird dead on the turf, he plucks a feather from the wings and tail as a trophy.

As to myself, I have no design on the pretty creature; I carry only a good field-glass, with which I have been watching his movements from a hiding-place in the low tangle, on a dull afternoon. At the first rustle, as I move, he is up and off, diving, twisting, and dipping in and out of the network of bare twigs without touching one of them, in a wonderfully adroit fashion; then he vanishes—a mere streak of grey and brown.

One is often asked what is the best way of watching the creatures: my answer is, "A suit of grey, a good field-glass in hand, and the quietest of move-

ments." A two-feet rule and a measuring-tape, backed by the best library in the world, will not make a naturalist. A practical naturalist knows well that all birds and animals vary ; and you will find as much difference, comparatively speaking, in the sizes and dispositions of a nest of young birds or a litter of animals, as you will in a family of human beings. They will not all reach the same size, nor will they attain to equal depths of colouring. Three conditions also make a vast distinction—birthplace, food, and climatic differences. This applies more especially to the birds that migrate more or less. Great numbers of woodcocks breed in the United Kingdom every year, but the great body of them come from foreign shores and return again to them, as many at least as escape capture. Woodcocks vary greatly in size and weight : well-fed birds will run from ten, eleven, and twelve ounces up to fourteen or fifteen ; some again will not weigh much over eight ounces.

There have been well-authenticated instances of individual birds being killed weighing twenty-two ounces, and more ; but as I am not writing from the sporting point of view, we need not enter into the matter fully here.

In certain districts the birds are variously marked ; I have had woodcocks from the New Forest, from St Leonards, and Tilgate Forest, also from the coverts on the Surrey hills. They were certainly all cocks, yet not one was like the other, either as regards size or depth of colour. The bird from the New Forest was remarkable for the plumpness of his body and the shortness of legs. The friend who brought him told me that the woodcocks were all of the same stamp there, and they called them New Foresters to distinguish them from others. The cock from the coverts on the Surrey hills, where at one time they were numerous, was a larger bird than the one above mentioned, and it was grey in tone ; when compared together the difference was striking. The St Leonards and Tilgate Forest birds held a midway position between the other two as regarded size and colouring.

In my rambles I have come on very quiet places, known locally by the name of Cockshet, or Cockshut, Hill or Glade. "Cockshoot," I presume, it was originally.

Woodcocks, if not disturbed, have favourite tracks that they take when they leave the hills for their



feeding-places on the moors below, some glade that they will shoot through, right down to the moist ground. Here, in my own time, nets would be hung in such a manner that the birds would dash into them and get captured like flies in a spider's net. Springes of various kinds were also used for their capture ; but I gather from what the old people of the locality have told me, that the "cockshoots" were the more successful. The shoots have vanished as well as those who worked them ; the name only is left.

The same method, only on a much larger scale, is employed for the capture of wild-fowl—the wading tribes especially—on some of the flats of our sea-coasts. Vast numbers are taken in this way, if those who set the nets get to them before the gulls and the hooded crows do. All waders can swim if they are pushed to it ; the woodcock paddles occasionally. One thing it is now certain he does, he carries the young to and fro from the nest to the feeding-grounds. The female alone has been credited with this feat ; but I believe both parents do the carrying. A woodcock chick is so small, the weight would be nothing. Still it is wonderful that it should be done at all.

In quiet places the mother and her chicks feed by

day. This is generally the case when the nest has been formed in or on some dry tuft or tussock, just off the green soft belt of the moorland bogs. I am inclined to believe that in southern counties the woodcock breeds early, for I was once near a female bird and her brood that were running about in and out of some half-melted patches of snow near the edge of forest-lands that bordered on the moor. It was a favourite haunt of mine, that breeding-place of the woodcocks. Many a time have I been there when the sun had got behind the great red fir-covered hill, making the whole look like a huge purple mass, with the mists rising gently above and around it, giving the landscape a bloom like that on a bunch of grapes. Fresh and cool it looked ; the moorland farm, with blue smoke curling up from its quaint old chimneys, and the last glint of light falling on the farm meadows and the moor beyond them. From the farmyard a wooded lane, or rather a moorland road, ran round the foot of the hill. Down this covered way the cocks would come flapping and shooting into the moor beyond. At the foot of the hill, where only the little trout-stream separated it from the reclaimed meadow-land, the ground was so spongy

and the bogs were so treacherous that the farmer's lads had to get long planks to put down when they wanted to gather the water-cress that grew there in lank luxuriance. Giant cress it was, yet "tender as a babby," the boys said. A wealth of wild life once existed there, but it has vanished, for the boggy ground has been drained.

I fear my readers will give me credit for romancing when I tell them how this actually took place, to my own knowledge. A man with money came and rented the whole of the district alluded to. He wanted to have more woodcocks and snipe, with a few other creatures about; so he drained their feeding-places in all directions, close to the breeding-grounds; because, as he said, it was wet to get about on! The birds could not put up with such treatment; they forsook the place, to his great wonderment, after all he had done for their benefit. After a time he too left the district. He bungled certainly, so far as the wild creatures were concerned, but in another way he had been of use to his fellows, without suspecting it; for good grazing lands and corn grounds now stand where formerly the bogs quaked. Now and again I hear of a brace of cock being shot

there, or a wisp of snipe sprung ; but that is nothing compared to my time, when the moorland children snared both snipe and woodcock in the season, and the parents disposed of numbers of them in a mysterious direction. In the course of a morning's walk I have come on scores of snares set in or near the runnels in the moor. A strict principle of honesty between cotter and cotter existed as to these ; each man or boy knew his own springes, and he never meddled with those of a neighbour. Whether this be the case now, or otherwise, I am not prepared to say.

Before dismissing our long-billed friend, I would just remark that his absence is only a part of other changes, the wild spots he loved having vanished also. As a game-bird with the sportsman he takes high rank ; as an article of food-supply he is of no real value, being simply a very small luxury on toast.

Much has been said about snipe, and by the most distinguished of our naturalists ; for in certain districts of the United Kingdom he exists, or did exist only a few years back, in great numbers. To my mind he is a more game-looking bird than his larger



relative, the woodcock. So far as sport goes, he is more to be considered, for he is, I believe, distributed all over the country in suitable localities, whereas the woodcock is, so to speak, more local in all his arrangements. You will generally find him in any likely wood, or on any moor, unless he has been much harried. The snipe, so far as I know him, shoots all over. All sportsmen are keen after him, being both a good bird for eating and good for sport also. Snipes are beautiful, both as regards shape and colour; but their tones of colouring run in stripes of yellow and warm brown, mixed with white and pale drab, the very tints of the withered herbage that they hide or rest in. So closely do their colours agree with their surroundings, that you might be within a few yards of half-a-dozen of the birds without perceiving one, until they sprang up, shouting "Scape, scape," at their very loudest, and twisting like corkscrews. Very fractious they are in their movements: at one time you are not able to get within fifty yards of them, at another they will allow you to get close to them.

As far as food goes, snipe and woodcock feed much alike—that is, on worms of all sorts. The idea

of living by suction has been exploded for a long time ; it was once firmly believed in. A tame woodcock will dispose of as many worms in reason as you like to give him. To speak of tame woodcocks, snipes, and sandpipers sounds rather an anomaly ; but some of our sportsmen naturalists have kept all these, and with success.

The mists of tradition that have hung over natural life are slowly clearing away ; soon a mass of literature that has been bolstered up and foisted on a confiding public will be only waste paper. The "gentle reader" has been bidden to accompany the author to the outermost Hebrides or to the mist-covered mountains of Scotland to see such and such a bird in its native haunts, when one could see the same bird, perfectly at home, in one's own neighbourhood. Of course Scotland, and Ireland more especially, are the great breeding and gathering places for the snipe family ; but they do not all go there. There are morasses and bogs in the southern counties of England where the birds congregate in large numbers.

One great bog I knew that used to be covered with dwarf bushes of alder, flags, and rushes, with mosses and the plants that thrive in such spots : it was with-

in an hour's walk of a thriving town ; and there dozens of snipe could be heard humming and bleating all the day long, during the nesting season.

The wholesale robbery of birds' nests for money, like many other pernicious practices of recent growth, was quite unknown amongst us then. A man, too fond a parent, will, nowadays, buy for his son a full collection of British birds' eggs, with the notion that it will give the boy a taste for natural history. I knew such a case, but it was not a success ; you may give a boy eggs, but not capacity.

By the way, the cause or nature of that humming sound made by the snipe in his descent has been discussed by the ablest of our modern naturalists. They have, however, failed to come to any satisfactory conclusion about it. The wing and tail feathers of a snipe are on the table before me as I write ; and after various experiments with them I have my own opinion on this matter, which, however, I do not venture to give, lest I be thought presumptuous. One point is certain, the sound does not proceed from the mouth of the bird. When peewits have struck down at me whilst I have been walking amongst their eggs and young, it has been evident

that the humming whirr was caused by the wings and tail in their rapid sweep. So close have some of them come that I could see the shiver of the flight-feathers. Where birds have not been wantonly disturbed in their breeding stations, they take no more notice of man when he passes than they would of the donkey that crops the head of the thistle close to their nest or young. I have seen Neddy flick his long ears as they dashed down at him, and at last make a bolt of it, sounding his horn as he retreated. The occupier of that land told me that the reason they were so fearless was that in his father's time they had bred and reared their young without being molested, and he gave them the same protection. Those were certainly the most fearless peewits that I ever made acquaintance with.

The peewit's hum, which is only heard in the downward flight, is caused by the wings and tail: the outer tail-feathers of the peewit are not curved, those of the snipe are. Rooks, when they manœuvre and dart downwards like so many hawks, make a humming rustle in their descent. When I hear the matter of the snipe's hum discussed, as I do at times, a vision of cool dark-green leaves and bunches of golden



bloom comes up before me, and I see quiet pools spangled over with weeds, and the blue-and-white-flecked sky overhead. If I could be there once more and hear that sound again, I would not be curious as to how it was accomplished. Most of the vast quantities of snipe that are captured for the game-dealers are netted or springed; and they come over from the Continent, where their capture and that of other wild-fowl for this country alone is an important industry. Comparatively few of those sold are captured in the United Kingdom. I write this on the strength of reliable information. The net system is worked much like lark-netting in this country.

Young sportsmen often make the mistake of associating snipe with standing water; he likes moist splashy places where he can probe about and find cover at the same time. He is like most other birds that get their living from the water and its margin; no matter how much they may wade and paddle in it, they like a dry place to nest in. The snipe, after he has had a good feed and has washed the dirt off his bill and feet, generally retires to some dry tuft or tussock for rest. Like those of all waders, his wings move him vast distances with apparently little

fatigue: it is only when really heavy snow sets in, followed by keen frost, that the snipe comes to grief. In such seasons hundreds perish, starved to death.

They are not found now where they were once plentiful, because their haunts have been turned into corn-fields; the partridge calls to his mate where the snipe hummed and bleated high overhead, for the benefit of his long-billed partner as she sat on her large handsome eggs far below him.

If birds come upon a suitable locality as regards cover and food, they soon frequent it. From one small pool, where there was a warm spring, that never froze even in the hardest weather, surrounded by fine alders and willows, I have put up wild duck, teal, and moor-hens, water-rails and snipes, to say nothing of the herons that visited the spot. This was in hard weather. As to siskins and redpolls, or redpolls, the alders were alive with them.

The owner, a miller, gave me permission to shoot there; and he or his son usually accompanied me, for it required two of us to shoot there properly. After a mallard had plumped down dead with a splash, or a snipe had given the last flick with his wings as he lay spread-eagled out on the green weeds

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that never got frost-bitten about that spring, one not used to the place would think it was little use staying there. But we knew better; in a short time, from our hiding-place, we would see the snipes shooting high overhead once or twice, and then they would pitch down into their favourite haunt once more, The mallards were more cautious: they would dash round many times, in large circles, before they plumped down again, but after a time they did this to be roused again as before. We did not kill every bird we fired at, nor did we get all we did kill, although we had a good water-spaniel. It was a treacherous spot for moving about on; the water was full of weeds. We lost some of the mallards, for a bird may be mortally hit, and yet have strength enough left to dive when he falls. He gets entangled in the thick weeds, is too weak to clear himself, and so dies there, where he cannot be reached. It may happen too that he drops just out of bounds, on another man's part of the water. One finds some folks so very tenacious of their rights in all such small matters of flotsam and jetsam. It is not worth while arguing with these. In my younger days I have been guilty of using a small amount of physical force,

judiciously of course, before I could get others to look at the peaceful side of the argument in the same light as myself; but those days are far away now—one can only be young once.

That dainty, smart, little fellow, the Jack-snip, is a rarer bird, so far as numbers go, than his larger relative—though any little irregularity in the ground, a rise or a depression, that will shelter a skylark, will hide him from observation. The hollow left by the hoof-print of horse or bullock in the soft turf is sufficient. If a tuft of grass droops over it he is at home. When he frequents the water-meadows, any one of the tiny rills that intersect them in all directions—having just enough water in them for a loach or a stickleback to wriggle up—will provide him with food and a happy hunting-ground. He will stick like a leech to a spot that suits him. For a bad shot he is a most valuable bird; lads delight in Jack-snip shooting—for he may be fired at and missed for half a day, without deserting his favourite bit of water-meadow or his splashy rush-field. He is richer in colouring than his larger relative, having beautiful bronze, green, and purple tones in some of his markings. A small fellow truly is little Jack, yet he manages to keep himself in good



condition—weighing, however, only about two ounces at his best. If he reaches a quarter over the two ounces it is something grand for him. Up to the present time his nest or eggs have not been found in England, to my knowledge at least. Reported instances have been given; but after careful examination the eggs have been proved to be only small specimens of those of the common snipe, or heather-bleater, as he is called. Little Jack-snipe, like our common sandpiper or summer snipe, will trip and probe along the edge of any drain near a town for his food-supply. A railway station has no terrors for him; the rush and rattle of trains will not daunt him or his larger relative, if there happen to be a drain or two near, or, still better, a large culvert. There is something very attractive, in the shape of food for snipes, to be found in sharp weather at the mouth or sides of a warm drain, from a town or railway station.

I own to a high degree of irritability against the system of capturing birds and their eggs to supply so-called collectors—saving the mark—in season and out of season. The Bird Act is in force for the strict preservation of birds that do not breed here, nor ever will. It is a sore subject with all wild-fowl

shooters and all true sportsmen naturalists. One thing I know, so far as our rarer British birds are concerned, any mouching lout that gets his living in a way only known to himself and to those he provides specimens for, both birds and their full nests, can laugh in his sleeve at the Bird Preservation Act; for I know that no bird there specified that is at all uncommon can show itself for a single half-hour in certain places without being shot. If the poor creatures had all of them the bewildering, dodging flight of the little Jack-snipe it would be the better for them. In six cases out of ten they would escape.

It is not a system of extermination with regard to members of the wading family, to which the Scolopaxes undoubtedly belong, that I wish to ventilate. There is no fear of that, for they come from their vast sanctuaries and breeding-grounds far away, in their seasons, as they have done for ages. Nothing will stop the migration of birds in its due season. But the fens are drained now to a great extent, so that their haunts are limited, and vast hordes must pass on to other lands where they can find all that they require. Those that do find little lonely

spots here and there in our country, now few and far between, in their original wildness, we would fain see unmolested by collectors and their agents.

That fine bird the stone curlew, that looks like a link between the bustard and the plover, is to a great extent local in his habitat. His general habits are like those of the little bustard. Sandy wastes, rough, broken, bare country, great stretches of no-man's-land, suit him best. He is a bird of passage, but I have known him shot in the dead part of a very hard winter; so they do not all depart. The researches in ornithological science of late years show that the most dogmatic statements of some authorities (?) require to be qualified a little. It would appear as though our country were going through a climatic change; the summers are not so hot, nor the winters—saving part of the last one—so severe as they used to be in my young days. That may account for some birds being found now that were not found then. The question is, Were they looked after then as they are now?

The grey plover is found near the coast-line; he, like his very near relative the golden plover, has a black waistcoat in the breeding season. In his winter

dress he is hardly to be distinguished from the other, at least by ordinary shooters. One mark alone will tell the difference at any time: the grey plover has a small hind-toe, the golden plover has not. As regards the breeding-place of the grey plover, recent search has proved that the Siberian tundras, or marshes, is one locality. Man has yet to discover that bird Eden, where a particular section of the waders in lagoons have bred undisturbed for successive ages; rushing thence in countless hosts to frequent the shores of the whole known world, giving life, with their beautiful forms, lively actions, and shrill voices, to most dreary places. Perhaps one should call their voices penetrating rather than shrill; no matter whether the air be calm or the storm rage, they can be heard.

Let one who is a true lover of birds examine for himself the wings of a woodcock, snipe, or plover, or any one of the sandpipers, and he will wonder at the perfection of anatomical construction which gives the birds such power of making distance, as we estimate it, a matter of small moment. We can judge from their flight, as we see it, very imperfectly what their speed is: of what it may be when they are up in the



air, far above human sight, at full migrating speed, we can form no opinion. They know their own path, and their time to follow it; but "the way of a bird in the air" has long been a mystery, and to a great extent remains so.

The golden plover nests in this country, in the northern parts of England and Scotland especially. It is a far commoner bird than the grey plover, and it is the former species that supplies the game-shops with a dainty luxury.

The last member of the plover family that I would mention in this slight sketch of some of their number is the innocent ring dotterel or dotterel plover. He is associated with my earliest recollections, and, as I write, a long shining stretch of sands comes before me, bordered by sand-hills or dunes, sprinkled over with bents and thistles. A blue cloudless sky is overhead, and nothing breaks the monotony of the level flat except the rotten ribs of some ill-fated vessel, which stick up, worm-eaten and festooned with barnacles; and no living thing is to be seen except a motionless boy watching the dotterels that ran and piped about quite near to him.

Without waders the shores and flats would be dead

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and lifeless ; they are for ever searching for food in one shape or another, only desisting when the waters cover their feeding-grounds. A most important part is played by them in devouring, as they do, hosts of marine creatures that would prove injurious even to some of the denizens of the sea itself if they were not kept in check by the waders.

A fellow-naturalist remarks that woodcocks and snipes do not visit the tide. This may be true in a general way ; but in hard weather—such, for instance, as the birds suffered from so terribly last winter—you will find both of these feeding with the shore birds.

## CHAPTER X.

## WILD LIFE IN WINTER.

THERE is a weird silence over Nature, both by day and by night. Unless you startle some creature from its shelter, you will not hear the faintest rustle as you walk along. All live things, both furred and feathered, remain in their hiding-places, crouched up, to use the rustic term for being miserable. So thickly has the hoar-frost been clothing the leafless branches and the most slender twigs of the trees for many days, that they droop with the weight of it. Copse and hedgerow are clothed with the same sparkling mantle; and some of the bracken stems, where they are crooked by natural decay, look like the hind-feet of hares modelled in frosted silver; in

fact, Jack Frost has been playing the strangest and most beautiful vagaries in all directions.

Birds are under some strange influence in such hard weather as came to us at the close of the year 1890. I fancy hosts of migrants came to grief in making their passage that foggy winter. For some reason only known to themselves, the woodland districts, rivers, ponds, and streams round and about the immediate neighbourhood of the Surrey hills were, comparatively speaking, deserted by the birds. For certain species I searched most diligently in their accustomed haunts, but without success.

First on our list the birds of prey, so far as the hawk tribe are concerned, were conspicuous by their absence; not even a kestrel shows itself. This is perhaps not surprising, for the whole tribe of *Raptors* shift about a great deal, independently of their regular migrations. I believe that very few of the family breed here now, compared to the numbers that come to us from beyond the sea, where flight-nets are fixed for fowl. A fishing-net, the longer the better if the mesh is just right, will tell a curious tale at times regarding strange fowl that get meshed. There is a good sale always for both web and hen

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footed fowl ; but when the greater part of the catch has consisted, in such weather as we are now writing about, of owls. much has been said by their unwilling captors to little purpose, in language not suited to ears polite. "What can us do with the cussed outlandish things, dead as door-nails too? We can't eat 'em biled nor yet frizzled, chuck 'em in ter tide fur crabs an' dogs (dogfish)." I have had a part in this business, and can speak feelingly in respect to it. When a man has the devil in both pockets, to speak in our homely phrase, and finds his stomach trying to scrape acquaintance with his backbone, it is exasperating to find three or four owls in a net instead of ducks, and gives one "the megrums."

The white owl visits the tide—I have watched him there myself, but have never seen him in the nets, as I have woodcock, owls, and brown owls. These certainly entered the net on the seaward side. Forty, nay, a hundred miles are as nothing to a bird, especially a bird of prey.

The birds and animals of the woodland regions are mute under certain conditions of the weather. Bright hard frost, and a clear bracing air, make them feel all alive. They may have to hunt most perseveringly

for their food, but the course is perfectly clear before them ; leaves can be turned over and the hedgerows explored in comfort ; but when the thick furry hoar-frost covers everything, it is a different matter. At the least jar, as they move about in their search, a shower of fine glass-like spikes falls on their fur or plumage, and these stick. Then the warmth of the creature's body melts the particles, and the bird or beast is miserable. We know from personal experience what penetrating power the melting frost has. I have come home in weather such as this, after a long and fruitless search for wild things, feeling just about as miserable as the creatures I was looking for could be.

That bunched-up plumage of the birds, the short shuffling flight, and the drop down—one can hardly call it settling—tell their sad plight most eloquently.

As to the furry animals, nothing but the most pronounced movement, threatening danger, on your part, will cause them to leave their retreats. Now rabbits get confused often in looking for their homes, and lie out. In waste lands—I do not refer to rabbit-warrens—stoats and large rats give the rabbits notice to quit in their own practical fashion, and the poor things must squat outside.

Then what was termed, in our district, the Leather Brigade turned out, fully equipped for action, wearing stout hob-nailed shoes, iron-tipped at toe and heel, and leather gaiters reaching up to the thigh. On their hands were hedging, gauntleted gloves. To all appearance the brigade consisted only of four or five stalwart young rustics out for a walk. I confess that I have made one of the party more than once, and have repeatedly watched their tactics. The title, Leather Brigade, was bestowed on these young men by the woodland neighbours, who were not deficient in a hearty sense of humour. The brigade went to work by starting in Indian file, and in silence, looking keenly to right and left for any trace of fur or feather. Had the creatures kept to their own well-watched preserves, it would have been better for them; or if they could have gone out without leaving tracks behind them; for clever as wild creatures are in baffling their natural enemies, to these practised rangers they were plainly visible. Presently one would point with his finger, and the leader would look. "In or out?" would be whispered; and then round some small clump of tangle a circle would be formed, the rabbit visible in the centre of it, his head drawn into his

shoulders, ears laid close, and his bright eyes looking all ways at once.

"Stomp (stamp) him out!" is the order shouted ; there is no silence now. Out bolts the rabbit, and the next instant he is spinning in the air overhead, sent up by a powerful kick from one of the brigade ; then he falls dead on the ground. I have seen one member of that leather brigade drive his foot—a large foot it was—clean through the ceiling of the country inn where I was staying, and bring down a yard of lath and plaster fixed round his enormous laced-up boot. The consternation of the good host when he heard the clatter and saw the wreck of his ceiling, with the roars and yells of laughter from the company, made a pretty to-do. The culprit, a young woodland giant, looked first at the hole in the ceiling, then at his boot, and a grin spread over his pleasant face. "George," he said to the landlord, "that 'ere pot o' ale was middlin' strong ; if you likes to stand another I'll kick t'other part down ; and then, old feller, you can hev a bran-new ceiling put up." The wrath of the host was a sight to see.

I can imagine I hear some of my readers saying, "What a brutal way of killing a defenceless animal !"



But consider—if you are able to kill a creature quickly, before it knows what has happened to it, why complain of the method employed?<sup>1</sup> Sudden death from the kick of a large boot is, to my mind, far preferable to choking from a wire, or suffering from a bad shot. So quickly and surely could those great fellows use their feet, that the result was never doubtful. Hence the title of “Leather-gun Brigade,” to give it in full. Pantile, Romper, Waggle—who could clear a fence or hedge like a deer—and the Lady Cabin-boy, so called because he had a budget of sentimental, old-world songs at his command, were the nicknames by which some of its members were known.

To return to our birds. Crows, magpies, and jays are very busy and very quiet in hard winter weather, also very shy. When the weather permits, shooting is sure to be going on. Those who shoot are not all crack shots, and all wounded creatures seek shelter at once. If they have reached it safely, directly the coast is clear, their cunning feathered enemies are on

<sup>1</sup> In spite of what our author says here, one's instinct goes against doing a creature to death in this way. The medium of a gun or other instrument seems to take from the idea of slaughter, and the natural repugnance to taking life.—J. A. O.

the hunt. A low note of congratulation on finding the quarry, and then they set to work. Where game is concerned, the magpie is a crafty and mischievous bird ; but, after all, other creatures beside game must live, and in killing and eating mice, and other small deer, he does a vast amount of good. He is certainly not numerous in game-preserving districts ; you may see a single pair in certain localities in the course of a twelve-miles' walk.

Jays are continually on the look-out for something to eat, and they will lay up a store of acorns and other things in secret places for hard times. They know where to find it when they need it. When the weather breaks they make fresh cover. Other birds, and, in fact, many creatures, hoard and hide surplus food. Some members of the *Raptores* would be hard pressed at times if they did not do this. Those who do not actually hide it have the faculty of taking a great amount of food into their crops—enough to tide them over hard times. It startles one, when walking through covers that have apparently no life in them, to see a dozen jays or more flash out in front, flitting now here, now there, on either side and around you. Public paths run

through some of these covers, or by the side of them, yet the birds seem to know they can squeal and squawk their loudest there with impunity.

The rooks are hard pressed during murky, freezing weather. If just enough snow has fallen to make the pursuit of food very difficult, the poor birds call to each other disconsolately as they flap from one place to another, eagerly looking for something eatable. If they are fortunate enough to find any dead carrion it is very soon disposed of. The rook feeds in the same manner as does the carrion-crow, when his more legitimate food—worms, grubs, beetles, and the like—fails him. When driven to great straits he is forced to take anything he can get. The jackdaws are in just the same plight: they chatter in the most doleful fashion, in a very different note from the cheerful jackup! jackup! jack! of better times, as they pass overhead. What they get to keep life in them is a mystery. As a rule, any spot on the hill-fields, where the sun shines out, they at once pitch down to. In fact, the poor things follow the sun all the day long, if it shows itself at all. Sheepfolds do not benefit any of these birds now except in affording them perching-places, where they sit

humped up, miserable bunches of black feathers. They hunt the roads, the fields, and the farmyards to little purpose, for sparrows are very numerous and very hungry.

Owing to the severity of the weather last winter, the wood-pigeons, or ring-doves, usually in such great numbers, did not visit the woodlands for some time. We had had a most fruitful mast season, both for oak and beech, also a good wild fruit and berry time; yet, with the exception of the home-bred pigeons—I mean wood-pigeons bred in the United Kingdom, a small number, comparatively speaking—these birds were scarce. They come sometimes late from their far-away strongholds after eating up the provender there. Four or five hundred miles is as nothing to them with their strong, swift pinions. Some seasons, when the acorn and beech-nut crops have been poor ones, I have seen wide open cart-roads in the woods covered with a vast army of pigeons, all eagerly seeking for food, a moving, struggling, blue-grey mass of feathers. The clap-clap-clap from that host of wings was like the fall of some large tree which comes crashing through the branches of others that surround it.

The vexed question of the migratory movement



of birds has had much attention bestowed on it of late. My own observations concerning the matter extend over a period of many years, and I believe that nearly the whole of our British birds migrate more or less as the seasons vary. The golden-crested wrens, the smallest of our birds, certainly do.

In hard severe weather the coast-line is the locality to find bird-life, it being open and moist there. I have seen blackbirds, thrushes, and redwings, larks and pipits, also wagtails, feeding on the saltings with the dunlins and other small waders. Linnets, redpolls, and siskins I have seen in numbers close to the tide. Alders grow to a large size near tidal waters, at least they did so in the district I am best acquainted with, and I noticed that the siskins there were very numerous and in fine bright plumage. They were larger birds, too, than any I have seen in the alder thickets of the moorlands. The lark family affect the coast-line in a very noticeable manner; the skylarks come in regular armies at times, covering the flats, in such a winter as the last, 1890-91; they do not stay long, however: buntings come also. The snow-bunting loves dearly the wild, bleak sand-hills and

the shingle, dotted here and there with stunted scrub blackthorn. The colder it is, the better this nimble, handsome little fellow likes it; I have not the least doubt it puts him in mind of his own ice-bound arctic home which he has deserted for a time. He feeds on the small creatures that the tide throws up and leaves behind it.

Fieldfares I have seen close to the tide, but I do not remember having seen one actually feeding on the saltings, like the other birds I have mentioned. In the course of a three weeks' ramble, I observed about twenty fieldfares and three redwings, and wondered where the rest of these birds had got to this season. In 1886 we had a spell of hard weather, when the peewits came up close to the houses and gardens; in fact, any place where there was a bit of turf to look over, they ran about for hours as long as the sun showed itself. When the sun went down they took flight to their resting-place, miles away. The redwings had not been seen at all that season; but presently, when a change had taken place in the weather, and it had rained, the sun shining out on the following day, I found, on going home at noon, that the grazing-ground on

which my house is situated was literally covered with redwings. They must have been very hungry, for they were very tame, and they fed eagerly on the worms that had come out in all directions. The birds had evidently just arrived from a distance, and had pitched down to feed in passing. Judging from a couple that were shot, and brought to me to paint from, they were in good condition. Directly the sun got low, they rose in a body and passed out of sight; the next day not one was to be seen—their feeding-ground was taken up by blackbirds, thrushes, and starlings. These three birds, at the time I write of, came to our doors for scraps with the sparrows and robins. That same winter a fine cock hawfinch used to come for the holly-berries that had ripened in profusion on a tree at the back of our house. The want of water does not inconvenience birds in the least. They may be seen eating snow often enough, as a substitute for drinking.

The woodpeckers—the green or yaffle, and the spotted, greater and lesser, with nuthatches and tree-creepers—confine themselves to belts of old timber, no matter what sort, so long as they are old enough.

The only indication they give of their proximity to you is that scratching kind of soft tap when the bird's claws come in contact with the bark. All sounds are deadened in times of hard frost. Even the powerful strokes from the yaffle's bill are muffled; you might fancy that gaily-coated drummer of the woods was performing a muffled roll—a dirge for the dying year. The spotted species work silently at this season; but when the new year is fairly on in its course, their side-drum rattle will be heard again. The holes in old trees give them a warm shelter; no winds can reach them there. They find also an abundant supply of food, as a large portion of insect-life in all stages is hidden in the crevices and underneath the loosened bark.

Besides haunting the tree-trunks and branches, the woodpeckers and the nuthatches hunt about a great deal in the thick belts of cover that encircle the woods—too deep to be called hedge-growth, and not enough to be styled copse. Here, where the leaves have drifted thickly and the belts have a southern aspect, the green woodpecker is generally busy searching in the leaf-mould beneath for insects. He soon clears a space for himself with his bill and



feet—no small one it is, and then he gets a good feed, if I may judge from the time I have seen him stay there. After he has left the spot with a harsh screech, down darts a mistle-thrush from some yew-trees near to see what he can get; one or two great tits follow suit, but these are driven off by the thrush in the most savage manner. Food is the grand object, and one creature is always on the alert to benefit by the exertions of another. Acorns, hazel-nuts, and beech-nuts get their outer covering softened by being buried in the soft leaf-mould, and the husk or shell is easily detached. Crab-apples, which have fallen from the trees in some of the lonely spots, have lain there under the leaves and ripened thoroughly—a rare find for the birds. We read of roasted crabs swimming in the strong ale of olden times, and I am sure they must have been good; for after a natural ripening under the leaves these are, as the rustics say, toothable; and our children will tell you that wild plums, bullaces, together with the sloes or pickets, “ain’t to be sneezed at arter they’ve bin frosted”—that is, exposed to the hard weather. I can endorse this: the rough acid element is made sweet by Jack Frost’s action.

One of my neighbours keeps fowls, using a considerable plot of grass as a run for them. The rooks found out this place, and as I wrote, on a keen frosty day, they were busy eating up any food that the fowls missed.

The tit family, the blue tit excepted, confine themselves to the belts of fir that flourish luxuriantly near us. There is warmth in winter in all fir-woods; the heavy masses of foliage form a roof for all wild things great and small. The little gold-crest is in clover there, as well as the brown owl, and the rabbits beneath. The brown owl, by the way, goes to ground at times—that is, he takes possession of the rabbit's hole. I do not know what persuasive power he makes use of to constrain the rightful owner to abandon his warm, snug retreat at the roots of the firs; but the owl certainly does this, and he is not the only bird that goes to earth. Shelldrakes, stock-doves, with starlings and jackdaws, take to earth and breed there. I have seen the song-thrush also build her nest on the ground like a willow-warbler; she had left the covers close at hand to do this.

After all, it is only by very slow degrees that accurate knowledge can be gained about our wild

creatures. Something fresh in their movements, some peculiarity of habit in fur, feather, or fish which has not been observed before, will present itself to those who watch for it in a manner that is startling at times. It makes the true naturalist feel very humble in spirit, when, after long years of patient observation, he sees the different creatures show themselves in most unlooked-for situations, and apparently new characters.

I visited recently a lonely old farmhouse on the border of the moorlands. Close to it is a small pond surrounded by oak-trees; the branches overhang it so that the acorns drop in the water and bury themselves by the force of their own weight in the decayed leaves at the bottom. Wild ducks are remarkably fond of these acorns, and they have visited this small pond in the late autumn and winter seasons all the time the spot has been known to me. I once told a man who had been a game-preserved, and who chanced to be going that way as I was, just as the day was closing between the lights, the flight-time for all wild fowl, that if he got near the pond very quietly he would get a chance at a duck.

"What!" said the man; "have I lived all these years to be taken for a fool? When I want to know anything about ducks I'll ask you."

"Is your gun loaded?"

"No, it is not, and I don't intend to act the fool by loading it for fancy ducks."

By this time we had reached the pond. Up sprang the ducks, a beautiful sight, right and left, just in front of us. The way that man scratched and fumbled for cartridges was amusing; but it was to no purpose,—the ducks were gone. Then he bestowed titles upon himself which would have made him wroth enough if they had come from some one else.

During the bitterly cold season the few swimmers and waders about had a rough time of it. Ducks, moor-hens, and coots crept up any runnel that was supplied from a warm spring. The smallest patch of open weed-covered swamp was a boon beyond price. The poor herons came to grief. They are conspicuous birds at all times on the wing, and when the ground is covered with snow, and the thick withered flags with furry hoar-frost besides, he shows up very plainly when he settles. His craving stomach also



makes him throw aside much of his usual caution. Then he gets in trouble. I have seen him exposed for sale recently, much to my regret, for he is now far from a common object in the country.

When all the ponds are ice-bound it is useless to look for swimmers or waders in their vicinity. The only places where you can hope to find them are warm bog-swamps, open ditches, and moist tussocky spots, unpleasant enough to explore in such weather.

Woodcocks and snipes came very close to houses and quiet places last winter in quest of food. You might have been sure of finding both birds, in fields bordering on the moorland woods, in which turnips had been left for sheep to feed upon, not cut up with the machine, but in their natural state. The leaves are broad and thick, and by their cover they prevent the ground from being frozen very hard about the roots. In the middle of the day, if the sun shines, the frost and snow on the leaves melts a little and drips on the ground, for a time thawing the immediate neighbourhood of the roots they cover. The worms take advantage of this at once and come near the surface. So do the woodcocks and snipes, for they are as busy as ever they can be, boring success-

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fully in all directions. I have known good bags made at times out of turnip-fields. The manner in which wild creatures use the faculties which the Creator has given them is surely something for man himself to wonder at.

THE END.





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